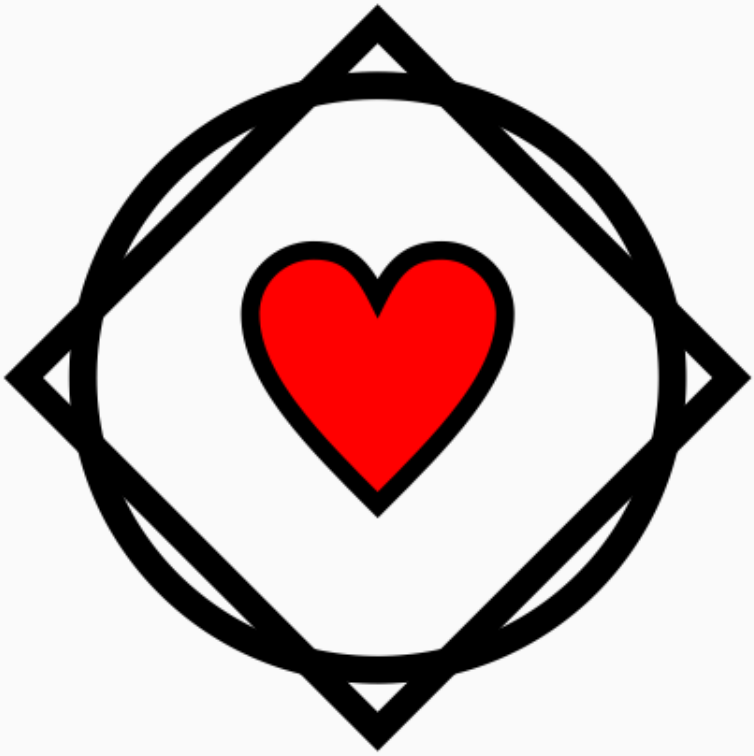
Dream Magic:
Awakenings



dawn harshaw

Dream Magic: Awakenings

by Dawn Harshaw

www.DawnHarshaw.com

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

A mage turns dream into vision.

- Awakenings, Dreamer's Handbook

Eric was running. *Not this nightmare again*, he thought.

He was gazing ahead, his eyes seeing only the path where his next two or three steps would land. The surroundings were nothing but a colorless blur he was running through. His mind worked frenetically to see not what was ahead, but what was behind: two goblins half his height trying to catch up to him. Eric could very clearly see in his mind the dark green skin and the multitude of those pointy, crooked teeth. They were swinging small clubs made from hard wood, the smoothness of which was most likely forged by a lot of clobbering action. Eric could not stop envisioning the jagged teeth and burnished weapons, since he was constantly hearing a grinding and munching "rawbrawrawrblr" sound coming from behind - a sound similar to that of a hungry dog attacking a bare bone.

I hate this nightmare. I hate it hate it hate it! This is the sixth time already.

Eric tried to increase his pace, reasoning that short goblin legs should be no match for an energetic, young boy. When he sprinted ahead, the ground became muddy and his rapid steps sluggish. The rambling sound became more distant just for a moment, then returned with the same intensity. With a feeling of resignation, Eric resumed his normal pace and the ground was solid again.

This is my dream! I should be able to dream whatever I want, not these stupid nightmares...

Still running forward, Eric tried to push the thoughts of failure out of his mind. There was a kind of calming rhythm to making one step after the other, but the grinding sound intruded each time he tried to let the pace soothe his feelings. The dread he was hearing was also the dread he was feeling. His whole body was tense, but the knot in his stomach was the worst.

Why can't I do something?!

A new feeling was growing alongside the fear: anger. Eric was angry not at the goblins, but at himself. *I'm weak, I'm pitiful*. He felt the anger stir up inside him,

displacing some of the fear. He instinctively knew that this is something he could use, and tried to intensify it.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrgh!"

He let out his anger in what seemed to be part shout, part scream, and part battle cry. His anger propelled him forward; he didn't even feel his steps but seemed to float ahead with haste. He kept going in this half-conscious state as long as he could.

The moment the cloud of anger receded from his mind, the fear came back more powerful than before: his stomach tightened and he bent over as if a powerful force punched him. Eric misplaced a step and fell.

Get up get up get up, they're going to get you, faster faster faster-

What little sense of balance he had, abandoned him. His mind was in a state of panic; his heart raced arrhythmically and cold sweat was all he could sense. Trapped in the nightmare, he continued to stumble forward.

Running seemingly forever with the smell of sweat and fear in one's nose would weary anyone, and it was getting to Eric too. He was tired of running and tired of being in a state of fear. The path he was following led across a shallow riverbed, where he absent-mindedly hopped through the stepping stones.

Not long after passing the river, exhaustion finally overpowered the fear: Eric stumbled a few more steps and put his hands on his knees to prevent himself from collapsing. His lungs burned with each struggling breath, and when he noticed this particular pain, he became aware of all the aching muscles in his body. He kept breathing: in-out-in-out-in-out, until his breathing settled into a more relaxed rhythm. He rolled down and stretched out on his back.

Abruptly, he remembered the reason he was running all night and lifted his head to see where the goblins are. He saw two small shapes in the distance, jumping up and down on the riverbank. *Haha, they don't like water*. He closed his eyes, let his head slump back down and succumbed to fatigue. *The grass feels so nice...*

* * *

It felt good to just lie there, body and mind thoroughly exhausted. It was the kind of rest that invigorated from deep within one's soul. Memories of the nightmare faded away into the distance.

When Eric opened his eyes, he noticed how warm the sunshine felt on his face. He grabbed a chunk of grassy earth just to experience the sensation of touch. The leaves of the trees around him never seemed more vivid and full of life - he could see the hue and motion of every single leaf. *Now this is what a dream should be like!* It felt as if the sun shined happiness to earth and nature responded in kind, with Eric in the middle of this magical motion. He quietly enjoyed being part of this experience for a small eternity.

"Hello there."

Eric turned his head, and saw a young woman with an open smile and long blond hair. He got to his feet and said "Hi."

"I'm Annie. What's your name?"

"My name is Eric. Nice to meet you," he said formally.

"Very nice to meet you too, Eric. Is this your first time here?"

"I guess so... Where are we?"

"Wonderful, welcome to Dream Camp! Well, technically, these are the training grounds of Dream Camp. I see you have already attuned to some of the deep magic here - nicely done! Anytime you fall asleep, just remember the feeling of magic and you'll be able to dream here."

"Thank you." Eric looked around, but he didn't see a camp anywhere. He wasn't feeling particularly magical, either. A thought hit him, and he said it out loud: "Hey! How do you know I'm dreaming? Isn't this supposed to be my dream?"

Annie smiled warmly at him. She pointed down the path and offered Eric her hand. "Come, everyone is at the Playground. We can talk along the way."

Eric pondered for a moment, and took her hand. She was taller than him; her scent reminded him of a big sister he never had. A feeling of loneliness passed over him at the thought, but that moment went away as quickly as it came. "Okay, let's go."

"Dreams would be boring if we were the only ones dreaming them," Annie explained as they went. "Sometimes we want to dream our own dreams, but sometimes we wish to share them with others. Dream Camp is a place where we can master the magic of dreams together. When I was your age, I spent most of my dreamtime here with friends, playing and learning. Now that I'm grown up, I realized I like it here the most, so I came back to play and learn some more," Annie grinned. "I also try to help out youngsters such as yourself."

Annie paused for a moment. "Let me show you something. Ready?"

Eric shrugged, then nodded. The next step they took seemed like a hundred, and he felt a bit dizzy. "What was that?"

"It's called teleportation magic. The fastest way to get someplace is to just be there! Don't you agree?" Annie laughed heartily. "Walking is better only if you want to enjoy the scenery."

Eric recovered from his vertigo and looked around. The sunshine, leaves and grass had the same vivid brilliance, but the arrangement of trees was different from a moment ago. *Awesome!*

"How did you do that?"

"Easy peasy," Annie said proudly, "you just have to practice a lot." She pointed to the left of the path. "Tell me, what do you see over there?"

Eric glanced to where she was pointing, but his vision was clouded. "Sorry, something must have gotten into my eyes." He rubbed his eyes, produced a tissue from his pocket and tugged at the corners of his eyes until he could see clearly.

There was a wooden table under a big tree, with two benches on the wider sides. An old man with a long white beard was sitting on the table, a big hammer in his hand, occasionally banging on what seemed to be a clunky, old-fashioned television set. It seemed to Eric the image was caught between multiple channels and showing lot of static.

"Isn't he too old to be a repairman?"

Annie had an amused expression. "Why? What do you see?"

"A bearded old guy with a broken tv and a hammer. Why do you ask?"

"Repairman, huh?" Annie smirked. "That's Master Joe. He's not a repairman, well, not quite. And you're never too old for anything!" She continued walking along the path.

"He's responsible for all this," Annie waved around with her hand, "all the trees, all the sunshine, and he makes sure there are no nightmares or accidents in Dream Camp. You can discuss with him whose dream this actually is, but he'll say something like 'everyone dreams everyone' and then go on talking for hours." Annie scratched her head. "Honestly, I don't always understand what he says, but Master Joe is a great person. When he's working, like now, I'm not sure what he's doing either, but our minds fill in the blanks in a way to make at least a little bit of sense, you know? Minds are tricky that way." She nodded to herself.

"So, he's like a janitor?"

Annie burst out laughing. *She does that a lot,* Eric noted. He thought Annie was a little crazy, but there was a kind of warmth to her and he didn't mind this kind of crazy.

"Well, I wouldn't call him that, but I believe he would like that title." Annie pointed a little to the right of the path. "The Playground is that way, not far from here. Should we teleport or walk all the way?"

Yeehaw, real magic! Eric was determined to pay more attention this time.

"Teleport! Please."

She nodded, lifted her right hand and made a waving motion from front to back. This time Eric braced for vertigo and resisted the dizziness. A field with plenty of playful contraptions zoomed into view almost at once. He saw dozens… no, hundreds of boys and girls of all ages; everyone running, hopping, swinging, pushing, pulling, jumping, climbing, talking, yelling… or even hovering above ground while training what seemed to be a kind of martial art. Most of the playground equipment was made out of wood, but some of it was grown out of living trees. Treehouses, too, were everywhere; tiny to large, all shapes and sizes. There were so many kids, but when he focused on one of them or a group, the space between seemed to grow larger - it didn't feel crowded at all. When he stopped focusing, the racket became more pronounced once again. Eric rubbed on his eyes, pondering the idea that he might be dreaming a dream within a dream.

"Cool, huh? Just try to ignore the noise. Let me find someone to show you around." Annie thought for a moment, then raised two fingers to the mouth and blew a mighty, high-pitched whistle. "I think it's best if you see for yourself what this place is like. We can talk later about any questions you might have."

A point approached from the distance - it seemed to bring half of all the noise coming from the Playground with it. *A dog!* Eric saw a big dog with white and curly fur approaching rapidly. Two kids were riding on the dog's back, yelling and screaming at the top of their lungs. The yelling stopped only when the riders arrived and dismounted from the dog.

"Hi teacher! Hi! Hi teacher!"

Annie smiled and made a welcoming gesture. "Boys, this is Eric. Eric, this is Duke," she patted the dog, "and the two mischief-makers are Kyle and Lyle."

Kyle and Lyle both had shiny black hair and beady eyes. They were several years younger than Eric; maybe around kindergarten age.

"Are you guys twins?" Eric asked.

"No, just brothers. We look more alike here than in real life," said the one on the left as he stretched himself upright, "but I'm the older one!"

"Kyle is saying that only because I'm the handsome one!" Lyle turned his head sideways to show off his short ponytail.

Kyle rolled his eyes and patted Lyle on the head. Lyle promptly patted him back, and the two started throwing light, but fast punches towards one another.

"Boys! Boys. I have a mission for you." When the jabs stopped, she continued. "I need someone to show Eric around and help him find a few friends. Are you up to the task?"

Kyle nodded. "Sure. Do we get stickers?"

"Yes-yes, stickers please Annie teacher!" Lyle interjected at once.

"All right. You'll get a sticker each, but you'll have to do an excellent job!"

Kyle and Lyle nodded vigorously in agreement.

Annie reached into her pocket, took out two stickers and handed them over. "I almost forgot," she searched her pocket, took out a book and offered it to Eric. "This is for you."

Eric took the book and examined it. The leathery cover felt pleasant to the touch. The words 'Dreamer's Handbook' were written with big letters on the front cover.

"Thank you. What is this?"

"Well, it's a book. A good one. You can look things up if you don't understand something, or you can just read it from beginning to end if you're the studious kind. Just keep it on yourself; you never know when it comes in handy. You can make it fit into any small pocket - Kyle and Lyle will show you how if needed. Are you all ready to go?"

They nodded.

Annie patted Duke, "Take good care of them, okay?"

Duke inclined his head slightly and closed his eyes for a moment longer than usual.

"Off you go! Have fun!"

The three of them slowly climbed on top of Duke. The dog grew to the size of a small horse, alleviating Eric's worries for its well-being. Eric waved goodbye to Annie, and firmly grabbed onto the white fur as Duke started running towards the Playground.

Chapter 2 - Sphere Magic

Circles are symbols of wholeness and boundary, but on their own they're too perfectly symmetric to exist in any awareness. Squares are symbols of distance and form, but on their own they are quickly stripped of any meaning by infinities and divided singularities.

The study of circles is zen, and the study of squares is mathematics. Physicists square circles and call them quantum strings, whereas magi circle squares and call it magic.

Imagination in motion gives form to magic - and sphere magic is the most basic tool in a mage's arsenal.

- Key Abstractions of Theoretical Magic,
Dreamer's Handbook

"Stop dragging me."

The sky was full of stars and the starlight weaved its calm and delicate magic. In a much less delicate way, Kyle and Lyle were gripping Eric's hands and dragging him towards a nearby campfire.

"You're too slow! We're not dragging you - you are holding us back!"

Eric opened his mouth to point out the fault in their reasoning, but he closed it without saying anything and resigned to his fate. *There's no point in arguing with people who can out-yell you.* Despite his current predicament, Eric was grateful: true to their word, the boys showed him the many nooks and crannies of the Playground - and they did so at breakneck speed. It was much fun.

"We're here!"

The fire burned with steady red and yellow flames. Two girls were sitting close to each other on the circular bench around the fire: the dark-haired girl was slightly taller than the smiling redhead. As far as Eric could tell, both were about his age.

Kyle dropped his backpack on the bench and gestured for Eric to sit. He cleared his throat in a grandiose manner.

"Dear Lucy, Eric and Rose! Lyle and I have decided that from now on, you three are best friends!"

As Kyle paused for dramatic impact, Eric looked for telltale expressions: the black-haired girl had a mild look of disapproval, while the red-haired girl's eyes sparkled just a bit more. Neither of them said anything, and Eric chuckled. *They too know not to argue with these two forces of nature!*

Kyle continued, "To celebrate this magnificent occasion, we have bacon!"

"Really? Where did you get bacon from?" Lyle asked, whispering.

"Yes, really. From Joe. Got some bread too. Maybe we should give him some stickers in exchange," Kyle whispered back.

Lyle nodded. "Let's get sticks for the bacon."

As soon as the brothers departed on their quest to gather pointy sticks of wood, the red-haired girl's smile turned into laughter. It quickly infected the other two and they all burst out laughing.

"Unbelievable!" The dark-haired girl was shaking her head and laughing at the same time.

"The little devils are so hilarious!" The red-haired girl wiped a tear from her face. "Eric, it is very nice to meet you. My name is Rose, and this is Lucy. It's delightful to have new best friends," she chuckled.

"Hello, indeed," replied Eric with a shy smile. He spent a heartbeat searching for other words to say. "Have you been in Dream Camp for long?"

"Not too long," Rose said. "I was here first, and the two of us met at the Playground few days ago."

Lucy nodded.

"Most of the kids there are younger than us," Rose continued. "The deeper you go into the Playground, the younger they are. It's fun to play with toddlers; their dreams are shiny and they're so awed by everything... but... it gets boring after a while."

"Quite boring," Lucy affirmed.

"When we met, we decided to team up and look for something more interesting to do... How about you? When did you get here?" Rose asked.

"Recently, I think. I was in a nightmare being chased, and then..." Eric was interrupted by a loud chanting noise.

"Ba-con! Ba-con! Ba-con! Ba-con!"

The brothers returned with a huge pile of pruned and sharpened sticks. "Turns out there was already a bundle just over there," Lyle said with a mixture of triumph and sheepishness. "Let's eat bacon! Ba-con! Ba-con! Ba-con!"

Lucy smiled and Rose rolled her eyes.

Bacon trumps conversation. Eric realized that some facts of life just have to be accepted at face value and joined in on the chanting.

* * *

Things simmered down considerably after the food disappeared completely into the bellies of the bacon fellowship. Kyle and Lyle were mucking around with their stickers, and the others were able to maintain a conversation without being interrupted by too many loud noises.

"Classes?! What do you mean, 'classes'?"

Eric felt his sense of balance tip unpleasantly. *I spend my days in school; I don't want to spend my nights dreaming about them too!* Eric didn't exactly hate school: his grades were good and he loved learning together with friends. However, what he didn't like was memorizing things he would happily forget the next day - that was just meaningless and boring. *Dreaming about school is a special kind of nightmare altogether.*

"Don't worry, you don't have to attend. We sure don't..." Lyle said without looking up.

"It's true," Lucy said. "There are classes, but there's no school: no grades, no requirement to attend, and anyone can start a class if they have something to offer. Let me just check..."

Lucy pulled out her copy of the Dreamer's Handbook and flipped a few pages. "Yes, it's here in the introduction: no tests either except for the three nightmare classes. If you pass the final test you may visit the Outpost or go on missions to help others battle their nightmares."

Battling nightmares? Now that was more like it! That was a thought that spoke to Eric's warrior spirit and made his blood boil! The not-too-distant memory of running from jagged goblin teeth was still a sore spot; a thorn in his side...

"Look!"

Kyle brushed away his stickers and held up his handbook. A big sticker with the words 'assistant teacher' dominated the back cover. "We got it from Mr. Smith for helping with the advanced nightmare class!"

He flipped through the back pages of the book, showing off a multitude of affixed stickers, many of them labeled 'mischief'. Even lines of text from the last chapter have fallen prey to the invasion of stickers.

Lucy nodded. "Assistant teacher, impressive!"

"Are all the adults here teachers?" Eric asked.

Rose shrugged, and Lucy looked to Kyle.

"No," Kyle said, "but, those who aren't... I think something is wrong with them."

"Like that ghost we saw, right?" Lyle asked.

Kyle nodded reluctantly. "Adult students occasionally attend some of the classes, and those adults talk and behave like normal adults do. Rarely, we see adults who are just walking around and not paying attention to anything - it's like they don't believe they're really here or something."

Lyle jumped up with an excited expression and pointed at Lucy. "I remember! Joe said they have been Lucy-ed!"

Kyle frowned. "He said 'lucid', it's a word. He said those adults aren't lucid enough. They just walk around and then they're gone." He shook his head. "Poor adults, something must be really wrong with them."

"I see," Eric said.

Adults often act like they know everything, but Eric had a growing suspicion that they don't really know all that much. *They just pretend to know.* Many times when he asked a question, he was told the question is stupid and to shut up. In the beginning, he thought it was his fault for asking stupid questions, but sometimes other adults did give answers that made sense and then the questions didn't look stupid at all. *So why tell me to shut up? Even if I'm stupid, how should I get smarter without asking questions?*

Eric's contemplative mood was broken by Rose.

"You know... I already went to one class," Rose said.

"Really? How come you didn't tell me?" Lucy asked.

Rose shrugged. "It didn't come up and you didn't ask."

Lucy and Eric looked at her attentively, encouraging her to continue the story.

"Well, it was sphere magic class. The teacher talked on and on... it was interesting, but I forgot most of what he said. I know sphere magic is the most rudimental of all magic - once you shape a magic sphere you can make fireballs and whatnot out of it."

"I remember reading about this..." Lucy consulted her book. "Got it! Page 23. 'Sphere magic forms the basis of all of the following magical techniques or disciplines, but is not limited to them: fire, water, air, earth magic and all secondary as well as tertiary elemental magic (e.g. storm or lava magic), portal magic, focus magic, elementary healing, basic conjuration, time travel, protective magic, transformation and transmutation...' Wow, the list goes on for more than half a page." Lucy looked up from the book. "Sorry, please continue."

Sounds exciting, Eric thought. Kyle gave a long yawn.

"Yeah, that," Rose confirmed. "Anyway, here's how I understand it."

Rose picked a twig out of the fire. "This point is imagination," she pointed to the smoldering tip, "and this is movement." She waved the twig around fast, and short, fiery, curving lines became visible. "When you move imagination very fast, you give shape to magic." This time she waved the twig very fast in a circular motion, and a seemingly unmoving fiery circle appeared. Rose continued with that motion for a while, after which she put the twig down. "My arm is getting tired, but I hope you get the idea. A circle is a basic stable shape and so is a sphere."

Kyle and Lyle grabbed sticks of their own and began mimicking the motion. Lucy and Eric nodded reluctantly.

"It's not that hard, but so far I've succeeded in creating a magic sphere only for a short while. Do you want to see it?" Rose asked.

"Of course! Yes! Sure!" They answered at once.

"All right."

Rose stretched her arms and straightened her posture. She lowered her hands into her lap, palms facing upwards one over the other, and took three deep and long breaths.

Kyle and Lyle put down the twigs. They watched Rose attentively, waiting for the magic to appear. Only the crackling of the fire and a faint chirp of crickets could be heard.

Eric rubbed his eyes, but he couldn't yet see anything. As time passed, everyone assumed the relaxed pattern of Rose's breathing. *There!* Eric thought he saw a faint blue light above her palms, but wasn't sure until it expanded into a small blue globe of light.

The watchers held their breath; Lyle even bit on his lip. The sphere turned, rotated and grew a bit more... but after a few heartbeats it turned into magical mist and dissipated.

"Whoa! One more time!" Kyle and Lyle started clapping vigorously, and were joined by Lucy and Eric.

Rose smiled wearily. "Thanks. I don't think I can do it again so soon. It's not hard, but it takes a lot of concentration and I need to train a lot more... Well, you know what? I can teach you and then we could train together if you want."

Fervent nodding was the group's response.

"Okay."

Rose extended her left hand in front of her, palm up, and pointed at it from above with her right hand. "So, just imagine a little blue point at the tip of my finger." She slowly started making a circular motion with her index finger. "Just one little point."

I hope this works, Eric thought.

Lyle clenched his fists and his face contorted a little as he concentrated.

A short, thin line of starlight appeared to follow the tip of Rose's finger. "Great! Now let's do it with more speed!" She waved her finger a bit faster and the blue line strengthened and became longer. "Even more speed!" The end of the line reached its beginning - the line became a glowing circle.

"I'm going to take my hand away now, but you keep concentrating on it." She did, and the small circle of magical energy remained floating above the palm of her left hand. "Okay, this was the easy part, but we're not done yet. Now we'll have to make many more circles and put them together."

"Keep concentrating on this one, but also follow the tip of my finger as we make another circle." Rose moved her left hand a bit to the side, and with her right hand she started pointing away from herself then back in a circular motion. A magical circle appeared obediently as the group got the hang of it. She waited a little, and then gently pushed the new circle onto the old one. "Next one!" The third circle came into view as she was waving from left to right, and then combined it with the other two. "It's starting to look like a sphere, nice work so far!"

After nine more circles, Eric tried to keep blinking down to a minimum - lest the magic goes away if he's not looking. His thoughts and feelings were flowing along the lines of the many circles he was observing. He never concentrated so deeply in his life before.

"Good job!" The surface of the magic sphere became visible as the circles revolved and meshed into one another. The sphere was about the size of a small juicy melon and it

shined and sparkled with magical energy. "We did much better together than I could do alone!"

Rose's praise went unnoticed as no one made a response. She saw their intense expressions and pondered her next move. "Forget this, look there!" Her right arm flung high into the air, pointing somewhere far away.

As their eyes followed her finger, she quietly turned her other hand upside-down and thrust the magical sphere into the fire. Blue energy turned to red; the fire gave a loud crackling sound and flamed up for a moment... then it subsided.

They all just sat there, blinking.

"Hey! Give us our magic ball back!" Lyle was first to regain his senses. "That's not fair! Not fair at all! Why did you do that?!"

Smiling, Rose presented him with her best 'innocent angel' face.

Kyle pulled at Lyle's arm and whispered something in his ear. Lyle protested, but Kyle didn't let go. Slowly, Lyle relaxed and nodded.

Kyle cleared his throat. "You have pranked us, and as a token of recognition we present you this sticker." He poked around in his backpack until he found a sticker, and then gave it to Rose. "Our revenge will come, buahahaha!"

"Thanks, I guess," Rose said.

Eric took a deep breath. As he breathed out, he could feel the tension of concentrating for so long leave his mind and body. He breathed in again, and laughed. He noticed Lucy smiling faintly and scribbling something in her notebook.

Rose was eager to continue. "Now you know what I know. Let's train for real!"

* * *

Eric decided to take a short break. After practicing for hours he was tired, but not as tired to be the first one to admit defeat. *If they can do it, I can do it!* He looked around to see what kind of progress his friends were making.

Lucy steadily juggled a few elongated circles of magical energy - it didn't look like a sphere, but it wasn't prone to disappearing either. Kyle and Lyle each went through the same cycle rapidly over and over again: a small blue sphere appeared, grew, wobbled for a second, then grew a bit more and dispersed. Rose fared best, as she managed to hold a

decent-sized ball for almost eight seconds before losing concentration. She was taking longer breaks between attempts too.

Eric sighed. *Making one is easy, but keeping it from falling apart is damn hard!* Frustration, rather than exhaustion, was his main enemy.

Eric composed himself and gave it yet another try. A magical sphere grew in his hands, withered down to only several light blue circles, became a full sphere for a short moment, wavered, became a sphere again, and disappeared as his concentration ran out. *Again!*

It wasn't long before one of them snapped and gave up - it happened to be Kyle. He held up one of his short-lived spheres and hurled it at Lyle. The sphere dissolved about halfway, but Lyle didn't need any further encouragement: he threw one right back at his brother.

Eric observed the shadowboxing of the fledgling mages for a while, and an idea hit him with full force. *I got it! I got it!* He made a small sphere, and quickly started bouncing it from one hand to the other. The sphere was wobbling, but it did not disappear. "Look! This is working." As his back-and-forth throwing motion became less crude, the trembling steadied as well. *Oh, I'm a genius!*

Eventually the throwing distance diminished, and the magical sphere floated steadily above Eric's hand.

"There!" Eric exclaimed as he lifted his hand. "Just imagine you're rolling around a marble in a bowl!"

"Sphere in sphere, motion in motion," Lucy murmured under her breath as she reached for her notebook.

The others immediately started bouncing from one hand to the other. As soon as Lyle replicated Eric's success he threw the sphere at Kyle, which ruffled his hair slightly.

Eric felt a sense of achievement. *It wasn't a trick; I did real magic.* They cheered each other on, and there was jubilant clamor when all of them succeeded.

The mood became more relaxed and elated for the rest of the evening, but they called it a night soon after. Eric, believing he was on a roll, had the bright idea to combine their spheres and make a huge one.

When they did manage to make a huge ball, it promptly fell into the fire and extinguished it with a shush.

Chapter 3 - Flying

Flying is freedom; it is the experience of movement combined with the ability to choose any vantage point - including one so high as to be free from any particular context or reality and observe it openly from the outside. One can even be free of oneself: sleep is one such mechanism, death another. A mage has more options.

- Movement and Awareness, Dreamer's Handbook

Rose, Lucy and Eric decided to take a class together after all. The sun was high in the sky and the students were sitting at the bottom of a tall cliff. Kyle and Lyle did not come; they claimed to have more pressing business to take care of at the Playground.

"Flying is easy. You don't need talent or even much skill to fly. However, what you do need is big brass buckets of courage."

Annie began her class without much ado and went straight to the point, much like a swift hawk swoops in for the kill. More than a dozen kids attended the class, forming cliques of their own.

"In dreams, the only thing keeping you from flying is your own fear. Behind the fear of flying is the fear of falling, and behind the fear of falling is the fear of being painfully splattered on the ground."

Annie-the-teacher was a bit different than Annie-the-caretaker, and this was the first time Eric encountered this side of her. *She's kind of scary, but she still has that warm smile. Hmmm.*

"That's all the knowledge you need. Do you know how birds learn to fly? They get kicked out of the nest. I won't kick you, but I'll make you go on top of that cliff and see if you have the courage to jump. Don't try to fly yet - just hit the ground."

Did she say hit the... Eric went mentally blank. A shiver ran through his spine. *Did she just say what I think she said? It can't be.* A few moments later the cold sweat came. *Oh my god, it's my first class and I'm going to die!* Eric tried to convince himself it was only a misunderstanding.

Lucy's face went pale as it drained of blood. She gulped and said with a flat tone: "She has a point."

Rose did not show any expressions, but her smile disappeared.

Eric shook his head in disbelief.

"Hey, why do you all look so scared? This is a dream; you won't die when you hit the ground. Okay, maybe a little bit, but it's not so terrible," Annie said.

Annie's consoling words had the opposite effect. A murmur waxed among the students. One boy stood up, looking all nervous and ready to leave.

"Wait! I'll just show you," Annie gestured for them to sit and muttered to herself, "I hope I didn't forget how to fall..."

Annie stood in front of her students one moment and on the top of the cliff the next one.

"Up here!" She waved to them, and then jumped. Her long hair floated and she was smiling on the way down. As she hit the ground, her form flattened and dispersed into magical mist - and then there she was in front of them once more.

"See? It's not a big deal. Don't think about it, just do it. Up you go!"

A path went around the cliff leading to the top. Eric's feet started walking, but his mind was elsewhere. The cold sweat had its own rhythm: it drew his fear to him, pushed it away, then drew it back again.

How could I jump? Eric envisioned all the terrible things that would happen to him if he jumped down from up high in the real world. First of all, he could die. That's an outcome so fatal and absolute it was beyond his capability to imagine or fear. Worse than that, he could be maimed, in which case he would be married to pain and disability for the rest of his life. This fear was the tugging, nauseating kind of fear - one that causes the cold, swirly feeling in the stomach.

Is it possible to feel pain in a dream? The most straightforward fear in his mind was about the moment of impact. He imagined it again and again and again. It was painful just to think about it. *My imagination is working against me!* The realization didn't help since he couldn't stop visualizing these horrible experiences. *This is my dream, my mind, I should be - no, I have to be the one in control!*

Tiny rocks crackled beneath his feet.

Before he knew it, Eric was on top of the cliff, staring down from the edge. For a moment, he wished the cliff was higher so he would have more time climbing to the top. The depth was ominous and welcoming.

This is it. I have to jump. Knowing in one's head that the dreamworld has different rules than the real world is very different from knowing the same thing in one's guts. His eyes were playing a trick on him; the bottom drew closer, than it expanded to even

greater depths. He rubbed his eyes, but it didn't help. *Jump! Jump! Jump!* Was he saying that to himself or was it the height calling? Eric lost his track of time, and wasn't aware of the others around him either.

He stood there without a sound, transfixed.

A soothing voice spoke to him: "Don't think, just do it."

Eric grabbed a name out of the back of his mind: 'Annie'. Determined not to be ruled by fear, he drew air in his lungs, silenced his mind for no longer than a second, and jumped.

His mind and his fear came right back. He was falling down with great speed. For a fleeting moment, he noticed a scream. *Am I screaming?* He didn't have the time to figure out the answer, since he hit the ground with a big thud.

The pain! For a moment of timeless time, only pain persisted in his awareness. *Hey! Who's feeling the pain?*

Eric opened his eyes and saw himself standing at the bottom of the cliff - no injuries. The recent memory of pain was also a kind of pain in itself, but it faded away as he regained his senses. He took a deep breath and sat down to collect himself. After several heartbeats, a triumphant grin snuck up on his face: *I did it!*

"Good job!" said the soothing voice. He sensed Annie's arm around his shoulder. "When you're ready, go do it again!"

Eric felt as if he found a well of boundless confidence. He nodded.

Going up the cliff the second time around wasn't as gloomy. His steps weren't weighed down by fear anymore and gained their youthful spring back. Eric saw his classmates at the top of the cliff; all lined up on the wide ledge and staring down as if they were frozen solid. A few of them were sobbing.

Eric took a deep breath and jumped for the second time. He felt fear grip him for a second, but he purged it as soon as he recognized it. He was screaming again on the way down, but this time it was a release and it felt good. After the 'thud' at the bottom the pain lost its edge as well.

I'm getting the hang of this.

On the way up Eric heard a cry: "I'm the best in my class at school! Why can't I do this?" It sounded like Lucy's voice, but he wasn't sure.

She's going to be fine... Annie will help her.

When he got to the top, Eric jumped again, but there was no 'thud' this time - he landed on his feet and got to climbing up again.

He jumped time after time, not falling, but floating down gently. The paralyzing fear was completely gone. After about the twentieth time, he walked out the top edge of the cliff, but forgot that he was supposed to fall down.

Eric was levitating in the air; enjoying the gentle breeze and the radiant scenery below.

After mastering the knack of throwing himself at the ground and missing, it didn't take much for Eric to figure out that flying wasn't too different from controlled falling in any direction. *Why fall down, why not fall up?* He swooshed around a bit, but when the possibilities of his newfound freedom hit him, he got a little dizzy and decided to take it slow.

He noticed Rose and Lucy walking up the incline. *Joy should be shared!* Eric thought about making a grand entrance and showing off, but he floated gently towards them instead.

"Hey airwalker! Was it your screams we heard first?" Rose continued before Eric could respond. "Just kidding! I didn't even hear my own, haha! Congratulations."

"A few more jumps and we will catch up to you!" Despite signs of recent crying, Lucy had a wide smile on her face.

Eric thanked them and accompanied them to the top.

"See yaaaaaaaaa!" The girls jumped, and screamed loudly on the way down for their own enjoyment. Gleeful, Eric waved to them and laughed.

* * *

Eric was floating high up in the air. He didn't want to go too high or too far from the cliff, since he wasn't sure if the class was over for him or not.

Eric felt exhilarated, but it wasn't just because he learned to fly. He felt a kind of serenity as well. A barely noticeable breeze tugged at him gently, and he let the soft currents carry him.

What was it that he felt? *Fulfillment? Sort of...* Eric felt wholesome, as if a part of him that he forgot about came back to him. He was still thinking as a landwalker who happened to fly, but that was changing slowly. *Perspective?* It's not only that he saw the world differently, but also that he saw himself differently in this world that became a bit

more magical to him. His possibilities... the pathways he can take through the world... opened up. It was fresh air, both for his mind and lungs.

As his mind was mapping out and pruning possibilities, and his heart was doing its best to take all these precious feelings in, along came a modest revelation: *I'm barely scratching the tip of the iceberg.*

Eric was slowly picking up about the little things of flying. It occurred to him that his way of controlled fall was powerful, but crude. Turning and adjusting his path mid-flight wasn't easy. He was mostly cutting through air in a string of straight lines - it was technically flying, but at his current level there wasn't too much finesse or elegance to it. *I guess flying is one of those 'easy to learn, hard to master' things.*

He noticed that, for some reason, flying towards something was easier than flying away from the same thing. *That doesn't make any sense. If I'm flying towards something, I'm also flying away from something else that lies in the opposite direction. Right?* Eric wasn't quite convinced by his own reasoning.

With all these thoughts in his head, he got a bit dizzy and decided to rest. He picked the tallest tree he could see and flew towards it. Touching the ground, even if indirectly through the branches of the tree, was a similar experience to that of the lift-off. *Maybe... one is like going home, the other like coming home.* The touch affirmed him in a way.

Eric enjoyed the view. From up here the trees seemed to have a special arrangement. When the wind picked up in strength for moment, the way the sunlight reflected on the leaves changed, and the pattern he saw shifted slightly as well. His classmates were jumping, floating and flying around the cliff. No one was staring down the depths anymore.

Lucy, Rose and Annie flew leisurely towards Eric. Rose twirled in the air, and Annie was explaining something to them. When they grabbed ahold a few of the stronger branches, the treetop shook and swung noticeably.

"Hey!" With both hands, Eric held onto the branch he was sitting on.

"Hey yourself!" Rose said with a grin. "Is this great or what? I used to have flying dreams when I was little, but this is so much better than I remember! I don't know why I didn't think of doing this sooner!"

"Perhaps because of the whole, you know, 'we're gonna die!' thing?" Lucy ran her hand through her somewhat ruffled hair, but it remained ruffled.

"Yeah... that," Rose said.

"How did it go?" Eric asked.

"I was very scared at first... but then I realized it has nothing to do with being afraid. If I want to fly, I have to jump. Simple logic," Lucy said.

"I'm very proud of all of you," Annie lauded. "Everyone deals with the fear in their own way, and you didn't let it rule you."

"Did everyone make it in our class?" Rose asked.

Annie's smile faded away. "Sadly, no. Four students quit this time, out of the eighteen. Hopefully they'll try again later, either in class or on their own," she shrugged. "Flying is my most popular class, the turnout is great, but I can't get everyone to fly. I used to explain everything beforehand, but it confused and scared my pupils even more. At least my success rate is substantially higher with this method. In the end, it's up to each person to take the leap." Annie sighed. "I would gladly take it instead of them - but I can't."

Rose put her hand around Annie's waist and snuggled. "I think you're a great teacher. You did what you could."

"Thanks, that's what I keep telling myself." Annie's smile returned. "Do you have any other questions? I don't have anything else planned for this class; you're free to go if you want."

"I have a question," Lucy said. "What is that boy doing?"

Eric looked to where Lucy pointed. He saw a small boy in a square-patterned shirt jumping down the cliff, and then flying back along the exact same path as he fell. Eric observed the little boy doing this several times in succession.

"Which one? Ah, I see who you mean." Annie smirked. "It's a rudimentary time-travel method some kids subconsciously use. He doesn't notice the flying back part; that's only visible to us. I bet he plays a lot of video games. You know, with extra lives and save points? It's an elegant solution to the 'awareness to ego-image' recreation problem, but it may have complications of its own."

A look of worry appeared on Annie's face. "In fact, I better go check on him and make sure he doesn't glitch into a loop... See you guys later! Have fun!"

Chapter 4 - Nightmare Examination

In real life the default action is to sidestep the things we fear. Don't do this, avoid that. It works well enough - up to a point. In our dreams we can no longer pretend. We can no longer avoid our fears, and they come rushing from the dark depths of the subconscious, coloring our dreams in ghastly nightmarish hues.

- Practical Guide to Nightmares,
Dreamer's Handbook

"Good day. My name is Mr. Smith."

Mr. Smith stood tall, his suit gray and stylish. He raised his hand, and tried to adjust the necktie he wasn't wearing. "Thank you for coming."

Eric, Rose, Lucy and other youngsters were sitting on a wide wooden platform. It was late afternoon and the rays of the sun colored the sky red. A breeze appeared once in a while to rustle the leaves of the trees.

Eric was quite adamant about taking the nightmare class next, and they ended up signing up for it. Lucy agreed it was a necessary experience, while Rose thought it would be an easy class.

"I will be teaching the three nightmare classes: nightmare examination, nightmare combat and nightmare mastery. This one is the first of the three, and I hope you will partake in the advanced classes as well. The master level class includes a trial - if you choose to test yourself and pass, you will be invited to visit the Outpost, engage in missions, and help others deal with their nightmares."

Mr. Smith cleared his throat.

"Well, let us begin by familiarizing ourselves with the structure of nightmares. At the core of every nightmare is an emotion of fear; when this fear manages to surface, it latches onto the senses and distorts them out of proportion."

Eric had mixed first impressions of Mr. Smith. On one hand, he was a serious man, who didn't smile or twitch facial muscles if he didn't have to. Yet, the eyes in that stern face were almost kind, and his strict demeanor carried an aura of purpose and precision. *An old-school teacher.* Mr. Smith seemed distant, foreign even, to this ambience of tranquil joyousness.

"The senses attacked first are usually sight and hearing. This initial phase we call 'encountering a nightmare', and it will be the focus of today's class. If the nightmare is

allowed to intensify, it takes over all the senses - distorting the presence as well as the decision-making process of the person. This phase we call 'being trapped in a nightmare'."

Mr. Smith paused, crossed his hands in front of him, and took a few breaths before continuing.

"Unfortunately, the process doesn't stop here. When a nightmare persists, it begins to inflict permanent damage depending on the nature of the nightmare - whether it's overt or covert, continuous or recurring, of variable intensity or not, and so on. Common resulting forms at this stage include mental breakdown, persistent anxiety, system shock and psychosomatic stress."

Mr. Smith's left hand began to tremble and he clutched it tightly at the wrist.

"The final phase is either partial or total obliteration of the ego structure. With partial obliteration, the nightmare becomes an integral part of one's identity and the shape..." Mr. Smith didn't finish the sentence. The trembling became more violent and pained nervousness showed on his otherwise expressionless face. "Excuse me."

Eric watched Mr. Smith turn around, retreat several steps, and straighten himself. He let go of his hand which was still twitching and shaking. *What's that about?* Eric looked to Rose and Lucy, questioning. They replied with shrugs and equally puzzled looks.

After a while, Mr. Smith returned and the shaking was gone. "I apologize for the interruption. Hopefully, you will never experience the more ominous stages of nightmare progression. Nevertheless, you will surely encounter them in others, since many adults have lived with their nightmares for so long they don't know who they are without them."

There was concern in Mr. Smith's voice. He raised his hand and pointed all-around in an encompassing motion: "Out there are the many grand dreams and goals which have spiraled out of control. These nightmares turn into a collective sludge which threatens not only the dream realms of humanity, but the real world as well. To stop this downward spiral, we need dreamers who are disciplined warriors and wise mages! The necessity is obvious." Silence followed and Mr. Smith's gaze became lost in the distance.

Eric was taken aback by the sudden change of tone. There was urgency, and a strange kind of sincerity in his voice. *He's a peculiar fellow.* Mr. Smith was knowledgeable, yet gave the impression of a monotone personality. *I mean, who wears a gray suit in this place?* But, there was something else that didn't quite fit. Eric's mind worked furiously to find a word to describe it... and churned out the word 'broken'. Eric couldn't explain why exactly this word got stuck in his mind, but it made him feel a little sad for Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith's voice steadied and he continued with a lowered tone. "For the time being, let's focus on the task at hand. I will presently use ward magic to create a minor

protective barrier, and conjuration magic to summon a specimen of the goblin species. Please sit around the circle I shall form now."

A magic sphere appeared in Mr. Smith's hand and quickly took on a green-brown hue. The sphere expanded to include Mr. Smith and a large portion of the wooden platform. A bright circle flared where the sphere intersected the ground, and except for the occasional shimmer, the rest of the sphere became invisible. He gestured for them to sit around the circle.

"The creature I'm about to summon is not evil. He is not from the human world, but he lives and dreams its own dream. At times, their dreams entwine with ours, and our fears are quick to fill the blanks of what we don't know. Fear distorts the dream; it hides and exaggerates. Too see past the nightmare, you have to see past the fear. Do not be alarmed, the goblin cannot leave the protective circle."

Mr. Smith closed his eyes. He put his hands together so that only his fingertips touched, and murmured under his breath. A flash of light appeared at the center of the circle and disappeared just as quickly.

"Greetings Gokrag!"

There was a goblin at the center; the same kind that haunted Eric's dreams. *Those teeth!* It had green pimply skin with charcoal markings, and it was wearing a tattered loincloth. *No club in either hand,* Eric noted with tense relief. The goblin grunted.

"How many of you have met a creature like this?" All hands went up in the air, some more hesitantly than others. "Good."

Eric's heart was beating fast, but the goblin made no hostile movements and there was the protective circle as well. He calmed himself. The goblin was much less fearsome in the flesh than in the back of Eric's mind.

"Thank you, Gokrag, for answering the summons per our agreement. Please accept this token of continued good will." Reaching behind, Mr. Smith produced a basket filled with food, and offered it. The goblin took the basket, sniffed it, lowered it to the ground and picked out a bony piece of meat. After slumping to the ground, it took a few small bites and began chewing slowly.

"Observe him. More importantly, observe the difference between what you saw in your nightmares and what you see in front of you. Even now, your perception is most likely distorted to a lesser degree. What do you find scariest about the goblin? That part is where the nightmare latches on to inflate itself."

Eric turned to Lucy and said quietly: "The scariest is the rocket launcher on its back."

Lucy chuckled. "Shhhhhhh."

It didn't take Eric more than a few seconds to realize that the teeth were scariest to him. The eyes didn't look red nor demonic: just small, black and tired. Granted, the goblin was a bit smelly, but not nearly as obnoxious to overwhelm one's senses.

Why the teeth? Eric looked at those jagged edges and yellowish spikes, devouring the meat one bite at a time. There was not much order to their arrangement; a few fangs didn't fit inside and remained in sight even when the creature closed its mouth. Eric tried to count just how many teeth there are, but the goblin refused to stop chewing. *They are not as big as I thought.* In Eric's past nightmare encounters the creatures' teeth were disproportionately big - such giant teeth couldn't possibly fit within the small head of the goblin. In his mind's eye, the goblin teeth shrank to the somewhat proportionate size visible before him. *Not big at all.*

Time passed in quiet observation and self-reflection. The goblin was done with the bone and munched on a juicy orange.

"Is anyone brave enough to step into the circle?" Mr. Smith asked. "Is the fear really gone or have you just swept it under the rug? This is your chance to find out. Will you make sure this type of nightmare doesn't rear its ugly head again?"

Eric smirked. His hand was up in the air, along with Lucy's, Rose's and several others'. *More than half the class. Barely.*

Mr. Smith picked out a tall, scrawny boy and directed him to enter the circle. The boy clasped his hands and raised them. He puffed his chest, and walked towards the circle as a champion entering a boxing ring. Mr. Smith's stern look silenced any would-be cheering from the audience, but amused expressions and a few chuckles could not be suppressed.

The boy carefully planted one leg inside the circle, and when the action met no response from the goblin, another careful step followed. At the third footstep, however, the goblin sniffed the air and made a slow, but deliberate advance towards the youth. In a blink of an eye, the boy was outside the circle. He sighed with relief and repeated the procedure several seconds later.

After a few tries, the goblin was getting annoyed and turned its back on the boy. Encouraged, the boy took a few more careful steps.

Suddenly, the goblin turned around with raised hands and a loud roar - scrambling to cover many steps in one, the boy fell on his behind with a thump. The audience was stunned in silence. The goblin made no further sign of aggression, but its roar turned into a throaty, cough-like sound. *He's laughing!* The boy quickly left the circle, obviously relieved and glad to be alive. There was cheering now, although it was unclear whom the cheer was for.

"Courage is admirable; cockiness is not," Mr. Smith said. "Who wants to go next?" After the spectacle, fewer hands went up in the air. "You. Go."

Lucy stood up. She walked casually along the protective luminance of the circle, intending to enter from the point farthest to the goblin. She took a deep breath.

"Good luck!" Rose yelled.

Lucy stepped inside, paused, and took a few more steps towards the goblin. They watched each other silently for several seconds. The goblin tried to pull the same trick as before: it turned around, waited a moment or two, and then gave a loud roar. Unfazed, Lucy didn't budge. She held out her hand, above which a perfect little magic sphere appeared.

"Come closer and I will make you eat this," Lucy said coldly.

The goblin seemed to comprehend the intention and neither of them made a further move.

"That will be enough," Mr. Smith's voice broke the stand-off.

Lucy backpedaled slowly until she was out of the circle, and then let the sphere disperse.

"Next! You."

It was Eric's turn. Rose tapped on his shoulder for encouragement, and he stood up. He exchanged nods with Lucy on his way to the far side of the circle. Once there, Eric jogged his shoulders and turned his neck around a few times to loosen the muscles. *Am I supposed to fight? Not likely. If it jumps me, I'll shove to the side and get out.* Deciding on this exit strategy freed up his mind to focus on the here and now.

"I'm ready!" Eric announced out loud, partly to motivate himself and give voice to his decision. There were no objections, and upon Mr. Smith's slight nod of consent, he entered the circle.

The goblin made no hostile movements. Cautiously, Eric walked as close to it as Lucy did before.

He could smell the creature. *Obnoxious, but bearable.* Eric glanced at the claw-like hands, the teeth that had some food stuck in them, and finally the eyes. The goblin was already staring at him, and once he met the creature's gaze, he couldn't look away. One moment passed, then another. *A staring contest,* Eric realized.

Time went by, and he grew more aware of the subtle stirrings within the goblin's still gaze. Eric's breathing steadied. *Will it make a move?*

There was a meager bone in goblin's hand, and the memory of a previous nightmare flashed in Eric's mind. A feeling of being chased by angry teeth and hardened clubs seeped in. *That was then - this is now.* Eric's gaze wavered for no longer than an instant.

The goblin stepped forward and let out a battle cry. Instinctively, Eric responded with a tense, loud shout of his own.

The shout-out lasted several seconds, but neither of them made any other move. Out of breath, the goblin huffed, stepped back, and calmly bit down a piece of meat from the bone in his hand. *It's over.* Eric retreated, and once out of the circle, he let out a sigh.

"Anyone else? Who's next?"

Eric walked back to his friends. Rose stood up, and waited for Eric to be seated.

"Go get him," Eric said.

"I sure will," Rose smiled, and her eyes twinkled with a dash of madness. "He's a sweetie."

Rose continued talking as she casually entered the circle. "Oh my, you're a cute goblin, aren't you? Who's a cute goblin? Yes, you are." She placed her hands on her knees and lowered herself a bit so the two of them were at the same eye-level.

"I met some of your cousins; they act all tough and mighty, but they're just big moochies really." She was treading closer in half-steps. "I bet you have a big heart beating in there too, I just know it!"

Rose kept talking, on and on without pause. The goblin was watching her quietly, tilting its head once in a while.

"...wanna be friends? I can be a good friend, why, you just ask anyone..."

When does she come up for air, Eric wondered. *She's relentless.*

"...come on, let me see your smile! Just a little, teeny-weeny smile..."

Finally, the goblin had enough. It reached into the basket, pulled out an apple, and tossed it towards Rose. The goblin looked her in the eye, and made a shoo-away gesture.

"...an apple? For me? I was just getting hungry. Thank you! You're so kind!" Rose waved back to the goblin and stepped out of the circle. She was grinning senselessly.

"What's your name?" Mr. Smith asked her.

"Rose."

Mr. Smith nodded. "An interesting approach, Rose. Well done."

"Thank you."

"'Interesting' is one way to put it... 'insane' is more like it," Lucy whispered. She stared incredulously at Rose as she came closer, and continued out loud, "I can't believe you managed to sweet-talk that ugly thing into giving you an apple."

"At least I didn't threaten to blast him away, ha!" Rose retorted. "Plus, I have an apple and you don't!" Rose briefly stuck out her tongue and maintained a mock-serious expression, but couldn't keep the grin off her face for long.

Lucy tightened her lips and gave Rose her best impression of an evil stare.

"You're both crazy," Eric said. "Much crazier than any goblin."

The next thing Eric noticed was an apple bumping his head and rolling down his lap. "Auch!"

Chapter 5 - Fire Attunement

Heat and light? Burning passion and consuming intelligence? The fire element is violent change and the fuel of willpower. Thirst after self-discipline for restraint, and aspire to wisdom for direction!

- Fire, Dreamer's Handbook

"Come on!" Lyle's words were a break in an otherwise continuous stream of inarticulate yelling. "We're almost there!"

The brothers were riding Duke and being their usual loud selves a short distance ahead of Eric and Rose. They were adamant about showing off their new discovery: a nearby place with huge flames that don't burn. Despite the brothers insisting on haste, Rose and Eric were walking at a leisurely pace.

"Where is Lucy? Is she coming?" Eric asked.

"I don't know. She mentioned an upcoming exam... perhaps she's staying up late to study," Rose said.

"Studying at night? She should be sleeping."

"Maybe she's studying in a dream."

Eric shuddered at the thought. "That sucks..." Spending half a day in school, the other half studying and doing homework, and then dreaming about the very same thing at night was not Eric's favorite thing. "That's one of the worst nightmares."

Rose thought for a moment. "I don't think so. If you dream about the things you learned and not about studying itself, it can be interesting. And sometimes things make more sense in dreams, don't they?"

Eric shrugged, and kicked at a grassy lump of earth.

"Maybe she's having a nightmare about failing the exam," Rose said.

"Lucy, failing an exam? Not even in a dream," Eric waved dismissively. "But... having a nightmare about being only second best? Quite possible."

Rose snickered.

"Hold it!" The shout came from ahead and Duke obliged. Kyle and Lyle dismounted and ran back to Eric and Rose.

"Hi! Hello!" Lyle waved his hand in front of Eric's eyes, as if to see if he's paying attention. "We're here!"

"Yes, I can see you," Eric said.

"Ehehehe," Kyle simpered boastfully and pointed somewhere to Eric's left, "There!"

Eric turned around slowly, and as he did, a sensation of heat struck him. *What...*

The heat came from a huge pillar of flames! The flames sprung up from a circle with inlaid pebbles, but there wasn't any wood or coal fueling the fire.

Eric's jaw dropped and remained so until he processed what he saw. "I don't get it. We just came from that direction, how could we not see it?" He directed the question to Rose, but she answered only with a look of disbelief.

Kyle stroked his imaginary beard. "Sometimes you can get someplace only if you know where you're going... or if you're awesome explorers like us!"

"Exploration, ho!" Lyle added with a raised fist, and ran towards the fire. Kyle turned around and joined him.

Eric wasn't so eager to go anywhere. The flames were imposing, majestic even - he couldn't help but stare. There was something about the dance of bright, shifting hues that was drawing him in...

Eric's mild trance was broken when Kyle and Lyle reached the fire, and charged straight into its center with a battle cry.

Are they okay? Eric wasn't sure he could distinguish their battle cry from cries of being burned to death, but the brothers were alive and well, improvising dance-moves amidst the flames.

There were several wooden benches nearby, spread around and facing the circle of fire. Eric noticed a young man waving to them invitingly from one of the benches. Rose nudged Eric and beckoned in the same direction. Eric mumbled in agreement and they walked over to him.

"I hope you're not planning to rush in like those two." The young man stood up to greet them with a handshake. "Hi. Ohlson."

Ohlson was wearing dark green jeans and a white t-shirt. His hair was cut short, but just long enough to be uncombed. Both of them shook his hand.

"Hello. I'm Rose, and this is Eric. We weren't really tempted to. What's all this anyway?"

"That fiery pillar? It's a high-end training supplement; used mostly for fire attunement and occasionally for cleansing rituals," Ohlson said. "Good for meditation, too."

"What's a fire attunement?" Eric asked.

"You don't know?" Ohlson scratched his head. "Well... if you try to use fire-based magic without some kind of attunement, the result can be unreliable and volatile. These flames were made for easy and straightforward attunement. It's just a little help so you notice the fire within, and accustom your mind to the conscious use of the fire element."

"Is that what you're here for?" Rose asked.

"Me? Oh, no. I'm planning to hold my first class soon, and I came here to think and prepare. Watching the flames is relaxing and makes thinking easier. To be honest, I'm not sure what I should teach!" Ohlson laughed nervously. "I have several ideas floating in my mind, but I haven't decided yet... When I figure it out, will you attend my class?"

Rose and Eric hesitated, and Ohlson continued. "I promise to do my best! If I see some friendly faces maybe I won't get crushed by performance anxiety..."

Eric exchanged looks with Rose.

"All right, we'll come to your class, just stop with the puppy eyes," Rose said.

Ohlson clasped his hands and his smile grew wide. "Great! My first students. Thank you! You won't regret it!"

Eric nodded, and his attention wandered back to the flames. "Does that fire really not burn?"

"If you want, you can give it a try. Walk around the outer circles of the fire, and when you feel like you can't take it anymore, just back down. With practice you'll be able to go all the way. This fire burns your mind but not your body."

They nodded. Eric was getting excited to see for himself.

"Decide who goes first, and I'll herd the break-dancers out of the fire." Ohlson stood up and walked towards the flames.

Eric bowed slightly, "Ladies first!"

"Hahaha, I don't think so. You're the brave one, go ahead," Rose waved him off.

"That was my plan all along!" Eric strolled after Ohlson.

* * *

Eric stared at the string of white pebbles in front of his feet. The small stones marked the boundary of the pillar of flames, and Eric was reluctant to lift his gaze. The heat from the fire came at him in waves; each demanding his attention and acknowledgement. He knew if he would look up, he might change his mind about doing the fire attunement ritual. *One step at a time.*

The thought of taking the first step itself wasn't so frightening; the short, yellow flames along the outer perimeter were almost imperceptible. In addition to that, Kyle and Lyle's fearless charge into the center of the pillar proved to him it could be done. *If they can do it - I can do it!* Eric didn't think of himself as a quitter, and knew if he took the first step, he would take all the other steps as well until he reached his goal. In his mind, with the first step he would commit to a decision.

Eric inhaled deeply. *Let's do it!* He felt the hot air fill his lungs, and as the air left his body on the exhale, he stepped inside the circle. The stones and pebbles beneath his bare feet were warm, but not searing. The yellow flames danced over his skin, causing no pain or harm. The heat got upped by a notch and he found breathing a tad more difficult.

"Good! Don't stop - always keep moving! The yellow pebbles will lead you around in concentric circles, while the red ones spiral into the center. Walk around, take your time, and when you feel ready, move closer and start circling again. Just keep walking and keep breathing!"

The yellow line was there and Eric began following it. *One foot after the other - not so difficult.* Just to be careful and make no mistakes, he walked a full circle following the outermost yellow line. He grew accustomed to seeing the dancing flames and feeling the heat, and a pang of boredom tempted him to head straight for the center. Ohlson expressly advised against that route; remarking that it is only for masters and hotheads.

Eric sought out the red line and decided it's time to ramp up the difficulty. Heading closer to the center of fire made it more difficult to breathe and move, but it was well within his level of tolerance.

Step after step after step.

Maybe he got carried away or just plain forgot, but he kept following the red line instead of transitioning to the next yellow line, or the one after that. It wasn't a conscious decision. His eyes might have been looking, but his attention was turned inwards.

Slowly, the heat around him ceased to be a sensation reported by the nerve endings on his skin, and instead became a presence - a reality which weighed down on him and burned his lungs from within. Soon enough, Eric found out that the secret is not in taking a step closer, but in being able to walk and remain conscious in that particular domain of fire.

Each step taken became an accomplishment in itself. The heat was no longer outside of him - it was within him. The flames didn't burn his flesh, and the body felt no burning pain. However, the flames burned his mind, his sense of self, and became a wall to be breached. Just breathing in and out required more and more effort. Eric was no longer walking a spiral or a circle; he was climbing a steep, fiery mountain with will alone!

Dangling thoughts had to go, burned away by the fire. Producing a thought only gave the inferno something to burn. As his concentration became more and more focused, his self-awareness allowed only two things to exist in his universe: breathing and movement. Breathing in and out was the only thing that assured Eric of his own consciousness. Distance was the other thing he was acutely aware of - every small movement had its cost and consequence on the 'self' which was burning away.

Going forward, his immense focus turned into something else. Breathing, his only confirmation of self, turned into a bright flame. Distance and resistance became not an obstacle, but a fuel for the fire that was now him.

He let the bright flame from within ablaze and burned away the illusive flames of the fire pillar.

Eric opened his eyes and saw that he was standing in the middle of the circle. The pebbles felt cold beneath his feet. The dance of flames around him had a magical motion, a magical tune to it. Yet, there was no fire other than his own.

With measured steps, Eric walked out of the circle, holding in his awareness the fiery shape of his own will. No thoughts or emotions were left dangling.

* * *

"That was totally irresponsible! Why did you allow them to rush in unprepared like that?" Annie was furious.

"I mentioned it's best to make a few circles and back down, but..."

"Mentioned?! You think mentioning something in passing will help them make an informed decision?!"

"If you put it like that, I guess not, but kids who find this place on their own are ready to..."

"But they didn't find it on their own, did they? They were led by fire-dominant brats to whom such attunement is trivial. Even if it weren't so, this careless behavior of yours-"

Ohlson held up one hand. "All right, I get it. I'm truly sorry. I made a mistake." He took a breath. "What can I do to help?"

Annie opened her mouth to continue the scolding, but several seconds passed before she said anything. "I'll get Rose out of the fire and figure out what to do next."

"Wait! She's already halfway through. Perhaps she'll back down on her own, and if she doesn't, yanking her out forcefully will cause more complications than letting her complete."

Annie nodded reluctantly. "You're right. Then... I'll go look for Joe or Maeve, they'll know what to do. Since you're better with fire than I am, help Eric get rid of excess energy. Okay?"

"Yes."

Eric heard the dispute, and watched Annie depart. He was sitting on the bench Ohlson brought him to after helping him out of the fire. *Or did I walk out by myself?* Eric wasn't sure. He was feeling very powerful, but also exhausted and frail. It was like there were two or more of himself, moving within him at different speeds. They were telling him to *move move move*, but all he wanted was to sit still in silence. His head felt like the different versions of him were trying to break out, and he winced with pain.

"Can you stand?"

"I think so. What was that about?"

"Annie can be overprotective at times, and I should have prepared you more. Don't worry about it. You're not the first to complete fire attunement in one go, and you won't be the last either. But, there are unwelcome consequences and we should try to get you through as safely as possible."

Eric stood up slowly. He was hoping the sharp pain would stay away if he made no sudden movements.

"Let's go with the traditional fireball first. We start with an air-based magic sphere, like this." A magic sphere appeared in Ohlson's hand. "Next, we push our fire into it and let the sphere carry it away. Watch - I'll do it slowly."

Ohlson stepped back with one foot and drew the hand holding the sphere close to his body. Flames glowed inside the center of the sphere and began growing. Ohlson stepped forward, turned his palm outwards and pushed the sphere away with both his hands. The flames intensified and the fireball floated away with moderate speed. It had a short, flaming tail. After traveling some distance without hitting anything, the flames burst up and dissipated.

"Well, that's the traditional spell. A moderate amount of fire energy is externalized in raw form, using only a modest air-based sphere for containment. Once the containment is removed or broken, the raw energy transfers in an impact or disperses. You try it now."

Eric stepped back with right foot and drew his right hand close to the side of his body.

"Bend your knees just a little bit; you want to be alert and flexible. Yes, that's right."

Eric willed a magic sphere to appear in his hand. It was a bit wobbly, with blue and red hues.

"Good enough. Now, the fire you feel inside - push it into the sphere and let it fly away from you."

Eric stepped forward, backed his right hand with his left, and let go of some of the tension he felt inside. The sphere became crimson red, turned inside-out, and a multitude of flames sprayed forth from Eric's hand. The release felt good and relieved some of his mental burden.

"Well... the bad news is, that's a very lousy fireball." Ohlson put on a frown. "The good news is, it's a decent flame jet spell for a beginner, it just needs a bit more direction. The externalization of the fire element went well; that means your elemental balance will stabilize if we get you exhausted. A flame jet is a very fire-intensive spell used in close-combat; unfortunately, it's also less versatile than a fireball."

Eric nodded. A part of him knew exactly what Ohlson was talking about.

Ohlson thought for a bit. "Perhaps we should try a spell which uses water for containment? For example, the traditional energy beam. Hmm... This one is quite tricky to do slowly, pay attention."

Ohlson raised his hand, palm facing outward. A magic sphere appeared in front of the hand. The point closest to his palm pushed into the sphere, turned it into a donut, looped around, and became sphere just a little bit farther away. The sphere once again turned into a donut, looped back into a sphere, and so on. It reminded Eric of those airplanes that break the sound barrier, but here it was done repeatedly and periodically, with a rhythm of its own.

Ohlson sped up the process. Waves appeared, then a shining energy beam burst forth from his hand in a straight line, inclining only slightly.

Eric clapped his hands. "Awesome!"

"Did you see how I did it?"

"Sort of."

"In this case, fire is not contained in a fixed shape, but in a repeated, self-propagating motion. The spell creates its context through which the fire moves. By changing the type of energy you run through the center of it, this spell can be used as a conduit in complex spells, or serve as a basis of many other beam type spells. For example, by making slight changes to curvature and quantity, we get the subcategory of magic missile type spells. Give it a try... maybe the water element works better for you."

Eric closed his eyes, took a breath, then opened them again. He tried to mimic Ohlson's stance, but realized Ohlson wasn't using one this time.

"It's okay, take your time."

Eric raised his hand, his palm facing away from him. A wobbly, crimson-dyed magic sphere appeared. It turned on itself, as before with the attempted fireball, and sprayed forth flames. However, the fire subsided and resurged several times - like his hand was vomiting flames.

Ohlson laughed. "All right, that was even worse than before! Water isn't your strong suit, but you sure have a lot of fire in you! On the bright side, you might have just invented a jet pulse spell... although I have no idea what it might be good for."

Eric smiled awkwardly. He cast his head down and looked at his toes.

"Don't worry, control will come easier with practice. Let's stick with the flame jet then, we'll get to a fireball eventually. Try to keep the jet within an imaginary arc. Even if this isn't the best way to train, we have to get rid of the excess fire energy."

Eric assumed the stance, and repeated the moves. The result was the same too.

"Good, take a few breaths and do it again."

It was discouraging that he couldn't make a proper fireball, but Eric didn't have the time, energy or presence of mind to spare on failure. He did his best to let go of his expectations, and focused on practice.

"Again."

He repeated the process several times. Although the result was no different, he was getting the hang of it.

"Good, again."

As Eric practiced, more and more of the fire left him, and he recognized just how feverish he was feeling. He was tired, but there was still enough fire to mask the fatigue and push him forward. *I'm parched...*

"May I have some water?" Eric asked. "I could drink a lake..."

Chapter 6 - Air Attunement

Let's skew the air / earth continuum and take a slice of it. Then, we could say that the earth element is that which has more form, while the air element that which has less form. However, there's much more to it than quantitative differentiation. Form is not simply discrete - there is always the interplay between form and awareness. When approaching either extreme, one splashes over into the other: much like background becomes foreground or existence becomes distinct from non-existence.

The attitude which takes the polarized extremes of the sliced view, puts them into boxes with markings such as 'matter' and 'dimension', and sweeps everything in-between under the rug is... questionable, and at times indicative of loss of mental function.

Such a view might be acceptable to a bored philosopher or a young mage on the hunt for limitations. For a physicist it's borderline idiotic; even medieval cartographers at least marked where the dragons are. For an elementalist, ignorant hauteur is outright dangerous: scientists may tend to go insane, but hardcore elementalists often skip that step and go straight to being vegetables.

- Form, Function, and the Four Elements,
Dreamer's Handbook

"What a sorry bunch - it pains my eyes to look at you."

Eric was exhausted. He was looking at Master Joe, but also staring past him into the pillar of flames. Rose, sitting next to him on the bench, was no less weary. Lucy's eyes were off-focus and she looked as if she was about to collapse and fall down from the bench at any moment.

"Is the biggest idiot the one who jumps in first?" Master Joe raised a bony finger and pointed to Eric.

Eric thought about possible replies, but didn't come up with anything noteworthy. He cast his eyes down.

"Is the biggest idiot the one who follows an idiot?" Master Joe turned his finger to Rose.

"I didn't follow him; I just let him go first," Rose said.

"Hmm... is that so?"

"Yes," Rose said defiantly.

"Well... Perhaps the biggest idiot is the one who follows two idiots despite seeing the outcome?" Master Joe lowered his finger, but looked intently at Lucy instead.

A slow blinking of eyes was the only reaction from Lucy. *She's not well at all.* Master Joe waited for a response, but she didn't sound a word.

Master Joe looked at each of them as if it were a staring contest. Eric bowed his head slightly to avoid eye contact and twiddled his thumbs. Still, he could feel Master Joe's gaze, convincing him of his own idiocy. *Fire attunement takes many attempts, how could I be so arrogant to think I would master it in one try?*

Master Joe sighed. "Stupidity is contagious, no doubt about it. I'll tell you who the biggest idiot is: the one who allowed you three idiots to march into the flames and wreck your elemental equilibrium."

Eric gathered his courage and looked up. "But, sir, it wasn't Ohlson's fault, he did prepare-"

"I'm not talking about Ohlson," Master Joe waved dismissively and laughed.

Eric felt the weight of the stare lift from him.

"Willful and gutsy, charging through walls with those thick heads of yours... You three may be idiots, but you're my kind of idiots: stubborn, with the right amount of stupid. No, Ohlson did all right. The biggest idiot is me for allowing *you* to be idiots of your own."

Master Joe held up his hand. "Just don't tell Maeve I said that, 'cause she'll want it in writing! Let's keep it our little secret, shall we?"

Eric found Master Joe's change of attitude surprising, but welcome. He nodded.

"We won't be needing this anymore." Master Joe lowered his hand, and as he did, the flames behind him toned down until they disappeared completely. The pattern inlaid with pebbles became visible: seven yellow concentric circles with three red spiral arms curling into the center.

"Using the head-through-the-wall approach can be successful if your head is strong enough, but that doesn't mean it won't hurt like hell afterwards. I have to rub your noses in it, because there are always consequences, and carelessness is not the same as bravery. Got it?"

Not waiting for an answer, Master Joe turned to Lucy and took her hands into his own. "Young lady, going through fire attunement with a personality predisposed towards the water element is not easiest thing in the world. The consequences can be dire. Follow the energy from my hands and allow me to fix you up."

Lucy was still pale, but her eyes gradually gained some strength. She sat up, straightening herself from the slumped posture she was in.

"It's a temporary fix, mind you. Elemental attunements work by removing a part of subconscious defense mechanisms and encouraging the conscious part to integrate more closely. Going too far in one direction can be... bad." Master Joe stood up and let go of Lucy's hands.

"Thank you," Lucy formed the words with relief.

"You're very welcome. How about the two of you? You look like you'll be fine, but I can give you a little boost if you want."

"I'm okay, sir," Eric said.

"No, thank you," Rose said. "I'm already feeling a little better."

"That's the spirit!" Master Joe bent down and touched his fist to Eric's jaw in a mock punch. "By the way, I'm no 'sir'. Just call me Joe - or Master Joe if you prefer."

Eric nodded. He reevaluated his first impressions about Master Joe. *I was off the mark.* Master Joe did have an aura of authority to him - *was it the moderately long gray hair or the simple robe?* - but the way he moved and talked was not an old person's way of moving and talking. His eyes were intense, as if he could shoot lightning bolts out of them, but also warm and caring. *Timeless*, Eric thought.

"Right now, you're like a sword which has been tempered in fire. Our task is to hammer you into shape, and later quench you in water. This way, the elements within you will be in balance once more." Master Joe stroked his beard in contemplation. "A few tenets of elemental magic have to be consciously understood and then sunk down, so to speak, to your subconscious. Feelings and reflexes play a large role. You must acquire an operational intuition, which means that you have to trust the conscious and subconscious parts of yourself to work well together. This will further your skills as well as the healing process."

Master Joe clapped his hands. "Air or earth? Which one should we cover first?"

Rose chuckled. "Whichever is easiest."

"Compared what you went through with fire, they're both relatively easy. Lucid dreaming is associated with the air element, and you're already doing it. You also have intimate knowledge of the earth element thanks to your physical bodies in what you call 'real life'. Pick!"

"I like air more," Rose said and looked questioningly at Lucy and Eric.

Eric answered with a shrug.

"I'm okay either way," Lucy said.

"Air it is then! Stand up and take my hand."

Eric stood up and stretched. Resting on the bench felt good, but the fire in him despised it and wanted to engage in any activity. Eric suppressed that feeling and took Joe's hand. Lucy and Rose reached for the same hand.

"No, not like that. Both hands; form a circle," Master Joe said, and they followed his lead. "Ready?"

"Are we doing some sort of air attunement? What are we supposed to do?" Lucy asked.

"Attunement to the air element isn't really necessary for you. Dreams and this realm in particular is associated with air, so merely by being here you are able to do basic forms of air magic. The magic sphere? It's air magic by default. Flying? Air again. However, mastering more difficult magic such as teleportation, portal magic, invisibility, or the high level meta-geometry of multidimensional identity management requires more precise understanding of the air element."

Lucy gave a reluctant nod.

"I just need you outside of yourselves while I tweak your elemental balances. Your task is to fly upwards - don't worry about the rest, I'll take care of it."

* * *

There was a popping sensation and Eric felt himself jump upwards. He was a distance above the ground, floating in the air. *Seems easy enough so far.*

He looked up, then lowered his gaze again. It was late morning and the sun didn't rise too high in the sky. Eric figured that flying directly up into a midday sun was unlikely to be the goal of the exercise - but it was an interesting idea nonetheless.

He spread his arms to try to feel the element he will be getting to know more intimately. He expected to feel a light breeze, but there was none. He looked at his hand, but he saw only a bundle of shining light stretching away from himself. *What the...?*

Eric looked down. He saw pebbles forming the large circle where the big fire was. He could see Master Joe not far away from a bench, holding the hands of two girls and a boy. He floated a bit closer. The girls were Rose and Lucy, there was no doubt about it. He

looked at the boy, and the face he saw was his own. The eyes were closed and the body was still, except for the slow rhythm of breathing.

Should I panic? Eric asked himself in a detached manner. *No, this must be part of the exercise. What was it Joe said? I should fly up.*

Eric flew up high without much effort. The trees below him became smaller and smaller. He went higher still, and the area below seemed to shift and change when he wasn't focusing on it directly.

He flew higher and higher, but after a point, the distance didn't increase. He could still see the camp ground and even individual treetops if he focused intently. He put in more effort, but after a while of trying to get higher, he got the same feeling of sluggishness he had when he was running away from the goblins in his nightmare. There was no dread in this case, but he grew frustrated with the fruitlessness of his efforts.

Eric mustered his attention to make a powerful and speedy breakthrough jump. Like a bullet, he flew up - and for several seconds the dream camp shrunk to an almost unnoticeable point - but his attention was yanked back by an unknown force and he returned to the same distance as before.

"*You're trying too hard. Let me help,*" he heard Master Joe's voice from somewhere.

Eric felt being propelled upwards with great speed and his vision became a blur. He entered a cloudy mist and gradually lost the feeling of movement. *Am I flying? Am I moving?* He couldn't tell since any point looked as the next one. The mist slowly dissipated. Eric was left in what he could describe only as emptiness.

There was nothing. Nothing except the bright light that was himself.

Eric wasn't sure if time passed. *Maybe it did.* A feeling of loneliness grew within him, but there was also a growing sense of familiarity: *I was here before. Many times.*

Eric felt a pulse, followed by a rhythmical in-and-out motion. The pulse was a heartbeat, and the rhythm was a lung expanding with air and contracting as the breath left the body. The awareness hit him: this was his own body! His real, physical body lying on his bed, resting in the state of sleep. He could feel the tension in some of the muscles, the slight cold in his feet where the blanket was brushed aside, his eyelids closed, but waiting to open. His nerves gradually offered more of themselves, passing sensations and readying to receive commands...

No!

Many times he went through this process before in his life, so many times in fact that his consciousness didn't even bother remembering being here after being awoken. Eric

kept as still as he could; he didn't want to wake up. *I'm not yet finished with the dream; think about something else! Think about something else!*

The memory of the dreamworld was still fresh in his mind. He imagined being back by the bench, holding the hands of Rose and Lucy. He remembered the sound of rustling leaves and swishing grass; the feeling of gentle sunlight caressing his skin. He imagined opening his eyes there, and momentarily tightening his grip to see if his sense of touch was working.

It worked! I think.

Eric felt like he was balancing on the tip of a needle. He was a bundle of light in the emptiness. He was a sleeping consciousness in a physical body, lying on a bed. He was a boy holding the hands of his friends in a dream setting he has grown to love. He knew if he lost focus just for a moment, he wouldn't be able to maintain this state and might wake up.

The needle tipped. Eric was back in the emptiness, his presence receding from his physical and dream bodies. Yet, it was not quite the same as before. *This emptiness isn't really so empty,* Eric thought. His mind worked to latch onto anything to experience himself, but Eric forbade it to go in the direction it just came from. He was determined not to risk waking up just yet.

He became aware of two other bundles of light in the emptiness. He was moving towards one of them at high speed, reaching out to it - he couldn't stop himself. His light began to merge with it. *A strange sensation...* A flash of experiences surged through him, but he didn't have time to make sense of any of them. He felt a heartbeat, a breath, and eyes opening only to provide him sight that seemed somehow off. The eyes blinked once, twice- *I'm looking through the eyes of another person! What...*

A powerful, blinding light suddenly hit him from somewhere else and he was knocked back into the emptiness. It spoke to him: *"Whoa there, tiger. There'll be time for that kind of grokking later. Just stay put, we're almost done."*

Eric obliged the best he could. It was easier now to just exist there, but this state didn't last long. Eric was falling at great speed; first he went through a mist, then he saw the ground and four specks holding hands before he crashed into one of them.

His hands clenched, then relaxed. He opened his eyes, and saw Rose, Lucy, and Master Joe.

"Hhhhhhhhhhuuuuu," Eric exhaled audibly and sat down on the grass to let the vertigo pass.

* * *

"What the hell was that?!" Lucy cried out, obviously startled.

"Well, that was fun! In a scary way," Rose remarked cheerfully.

"Don't worry, such restlessness is common. That's what you get when you have too much fire," Master Joe said.

Eric felt... *flat*. The vertigo passed, but there was still a lingering emotion of being not quite here. It was a strange experience, and Eric was processing it.

"Fun? How could that be fun?" Lucy asked Rose.

"What are you talking about? How was it not fun? Didn't you find it interesting?"

"Hmpf." Lucy crossed her arms. "You're an adrenaline junkie!"

"Well then, you're a comfort-zone hugger!"

"What does that even mean?"

Master Joe held up his hand. "I'm happy to see you girls feeling better already, but if there's going to be any yelling here, I'll be the one doing it... All in all, it went better than I expected. I guess you won't need any tweaking from the earth side, but let me just double-check."

Master Joe lowered his arms and closed his eyes.

Eric's feeling of not quite being here faded away, and slowly turned into a feeling of being grounded; of being himself and also being part of something. It intensified, and turned into a feeling of being inside himself, a pressuring, claustrophobic sensation that made a ringing noise in his ears.

"Oops, I overdid it, let's just back up a little bit."

The pressure on his psyche receded and Eric was back to feeling grounded.

"Is that it? Are we done?"

"That's it from me, but you're not done yet," Master Joe said. "I'm shipping you off to Maeve for the quenching part. Listen to her, and try not to vex her too much - she's scary when she's angry!"

Chapter 7 - Water Attunement

The water element is the shapeless shape, the passivity of reaction, the dream that does not cast the shimmering net of consciousness out of itself. It is the movement that doesn't act apart, but pulses in waves as a whole that does not quite exist.

- Water, Dreamer's Handbook

The sand was soft and the water felt refreshingly cool. *Strange how there's nobody else here but us. The beach is always crammed with kids from the Playground.*

"There's a prerequisite for aligning with the water element: you have to be able to breathe water. Since you can't, you will learn now - just go into the lake and breathe the water in."

Damn. What's this, get-Eric-to-kill-himself day? Again? On today's menu: drowning! Eric wasn't pleased, but he tried to suppress the displeasure by focusing on the task at hand and getting over this hurdle as soon as possible. "Yeehaw," he said to himself in a flat tone.

Eric went knee-deep, then waist-deep into the lake. The cool water soothed the tension within him. *It's just water. The human body is sixty percent water - which is more than half of me.* He was a bit surprised to recall such a number. *Must be because of those sports drink commercials on tv.* He prodded the sand with the sole of his foot.

"In the dream world, everything is breathable. Water is next best thing to breathe after air. You can even breathe in hard matter, though it needs a bit more getting used to." Maeve chuckled. "Nevertheless, if you get stuck inside a huge slab of rock, you should work on your teleportation skills as well - take it from a person who speaks from experience."

How reassuring. Eric lowered himself into the water. He submerged his head just to get it wet, raised it again with puffed-up cheeks, and spat out a steady stream of water. *Might as well have fun before I drown.*

Eric waited, but no further instruction was forthcoming. He looked back, and saw Maeve engaging in a discussion with Lucy.

Eager to get it over with, Eric breathed in deeply, crossed his legs and slumped to the lake floor.

...It's just like air. It's just like air. It's just like air...

Eric chanted to himself, determined not to rise for air after his breath runs out. He held it in as long as he could, and then breathed out very slowly... as if he was trying to stretch time itself. The deciding moment came, and he gagged for air.

Everything turned ominous - he was the intruder, the enemy, and the water around him was out to get him! For a split second he wondered whether he made a really bad choice, but that feeling of detachment disappeared as he involuntarily tried to hiccup, cough, and gasp at the same time.

This is it.

Water flooded his lungs, and with it came a feeling of surrender and acceptance. Eric's mind went silent as the severity of this new reality imposed itself on his self-awareness. When Eric noticed he was still there, probably not dead and with lungs full of water, he breathed out. The feeling of water exiting his body was a thick, flowing and needy sensation. The next few breaths were more stable and rhythmical.

Yay, he remarked with a mixture of real and mock enthusiasm. The world felt different; being alive felt different. *How addicted we are to breathable air!* if it's so hard to let go of the idea of breathing even in a dream. Eric felt that this simple realization changed him - and his perception of himself - on a profound level, but could not pinpoint exactly what has changed.

* * *

Eric stuck his head out of the water, breathed air deeply, then walked out and away from the lake.

He liked the way water and sand danced around his toes. Ever since he was a kid, swimming wasn't his strong suit, but he had fond memories of turning over wet buckets of sand and proclaiming them to be sandcastles. When a larger wave would come and wash the sweat of his brow away, he could pretend to be angry at the destruction of his magnificent art in the sand.

Rose and Lucy were sitting on a blanket-size towel spread across the sand, tugging at the edges of the towels they themselves were wrapped in. Maeve was sunbathing next to them, but she noticed Eric and stood up to meet him.

Maeve wasn't a petite woman. Eric's impression was that her crimson one-piece swimming suit wasn't exactly flattering to a woman of her age and curvature. Her grey-black hair was disheveled and fastened together haphazardly.

"Here you go," Maeve said, offering him a neatly folded towel.

"Thanks."

Eric dried himself and slumped down next to the girls.

"Finally you're not first at something!" Lucy said, grinning.

Eric didn't say anything, just smiled and shrugged.

"By the way, I'm still mad at you two for not waiting for me. What was so urgent about going through fire attunement that you couldn't wait?"

"Sorry, we just got carried away," Eric said.

"Yeah, Kyle and Lyle were so happy dancing in the fire, we didn't think it would be quite such a big ordeal. How about you choose the next class? I don't want you to be mad at me..." Rose made an overly sad face.

Lucy nodded. "Fine. I'm a little bit less mad at you, then."

"Hotheads," Maeve muttered. "You really should think some things through. I don't know why that numskull Joe is so irresponsible to leave such dangerous toys lying around... then again, we have an airhead throwing kids off a cliff to see if they fly and I too have to take time off to oversee reckless youngsters deliberately drown themselves... I need a drink."

Maeve turned around to her bag, rummaged through it, and retrieved a cocktail shaker, a cocktail glass and a tiny umbrella. She filled the glass with a translucent liquid from the shaker and stirred it with the pointy end of the umbrella.

Rose was eyeing the glass. "What's in there?"

"Gin-tonic. Do you want some?"

"Yes." Rose licked her lips.

"Well, you can't have any."

Rose frowned. "Why? Because I'm too young to drink?"

"No, because I intend to drink it all myself. Ha!" Maeve took a sip. "Besides, your elemental harmony is messed up. I don't want any of you eating or drinking anything before you complete the water attunement." Maeve lifted a metallic container out of her bag, rattled it, then put it back. "I do have some home-made cookies I'm willing to share with you after. Oh so delicious, mmm!"

"Didn't we already complete the water attunement?" Rose asked.

"What do you mean? Ah, the water-breathing; it's just a nice trick. I guess it qualifies as a minor attunement, but it's not enough to offset the fire you have. We need the real deal for that."

"Oh. So what do we have to do?"

"Have you heard of what we psychologists call a 'sensory-deprivation chamber'?"

"I did," Lucy said.

Rose shook her head. "You're a psychologist?"

"We'll use the lake in a similar fashion, and the water will show you its secrets if you listen." To Rose she said: "I keep several papers on my wall that say so, just in case I run out of toilet paper."

"What do we have to do?" Eric asked.

"Nothing. And believe me, that's not easy. I bet Joe gave you the head-through-wall speech, did he not?" They nodded. "It's a nice speech that breeds hotheads and airheads. It also makes my work more difficult. You can't will yourself through this one; no force or action will help you."

"I don't get it," Eric said.

Maeve sighed. "'Getting it', as you say, is optional. Understanding will let you down, especially if you wield it as a hammer to which everything is a nail. You have to be prepared to cast it aside. Trust yourself, your feelings, your subconscious, the parts of yourself you don't even realize are parts of you."

Eric looked at Lucy, hoping she had some more sensible information, but she just shrugged.

"Go into the lake, feel the waves, and let go. Whenever you're ready. This box of cookies and I are waiting for you."

* * *

Eric was swimming in the lake. He didn't know what he was supposed to do, *or not do*, so he just splashed around. He found that diving was easier with lungs full of water, but there wasn't anything worth diving for. *Like a big pool,* the lake had no flora or fauna, just water and the sandy bottom.

Eric went back to the shallows. He liked to play a little game: he would fall to the bottom while breathing out completely, hug the ground, propel himself out of the water, breathe in, and slowly let it out again. It was fun.

He experimented with breathing air and water in the same breath, but it was a yucky feeling; not pleasant at all.

Another game he liked to play was to see how long he could hold his breath. He crossed his legs and dropped to the bottom. Since he didn't have to rise for air, the game was simpler, but also less exciting.

Eric's mind wandered, and the tension in his muscles relaxed. It felt good to be in an environment that opened its own world of magic. Eric fished for a word to describe this state to himself, and the word 'meditation' turned up in his mental net. He was slightly revulsed with the word his subconscious presented - after all, meditation is something boring for old people with crunchy bones. *Well, they must be doing it wrong!* Eric overcame the revulsion and accepted the word as his own.

Hmmmmm... breathe in... breathe out...

Time passed, without hurry.

A voice came muffled from above. *Why do you interrupt my meditation?* Yet, he could hear the voice clearly in his mind, and it swirled in his awareness until the sound crystallized into words he could understand.

"The uninterrupted surface of the lake is clear and at balance. When you enter the water, you disrupt that balance. Listen to the waves and align yourself so that the lake is clear again."

Now you tell me... The words 'listen', 'clear' and 'balance' made sense to Eric, but the sentences on the whole did not. He resumed his meditation and focused on listening. *What do I hear? Nothing...*

A while later it occurred to Eric that the 'nothing' he was hearing was actually a static-like background noise: *Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.*

Where did that noise come from? Eric noticed the sound of his heartbeat. It pumped not only the blood in his veins, but it also caused small vibrations in his body that went out and came back to him as tiny waves of water. He heard the sound of his underwater breath - water whooshing in and whooshing out.

The more he listened, the less he heard. The sounds became feelings on his skin; gentle touches of waves and vibrations.

He recalled the image of his will from the fire attunement ritual: the vision of a great, burning flame. The water around him threatened to extinguish that flame, wave by wave, touch by touch. For a moment he was tempted to lash out, let the flame loose and burn away the whole lake and evaporate all the water in it. He wasn't sure he could do it, but he wasn't sure he wanted to, either. He let the temptation wash away.

The fire became enclosed by a bubble, and the bubble turned into a wave. This strange fire threaded upon itself, and became a texture of waves Eric could touch with his awareness. The fabric felt smooth, sometimes a bit rough with a loose thread here and there. He still felt he could torch the fabric if he wanted to. As he traced the surface with the touch of his awareness, the threads and waves extended up from the two dimensions of the plane and exploded with movement in all directions - shattering the awareness that observed them.

Eric panicked - his own inner thoughts came back as sensations of touch. The gentle waves of water were not only assaulting his bodily form, but also his mind and sense of identity. He felt himself outside himself; it was alien and terrifying. The waves no longer echoed and bounced back when they hit his form - they went right through.

Where am I?! Who am I?

The questions echoed back recursively with no answer. Stronger than the panic of having no answer, was the echoing annoyance of having asked the question. *Clarity,* Eric thought. *Clear surface of the lake.*

Eric, whoever that was, started punching waves in the multidimensional fabric to clear out the echo: a wave gets cancelled out by another wave. Action-reaction.

There was only the undisturbed water and its perfect symmetries.

* * *

"Wake up, water child! Or should I say, young elementalist."

Eric opened his eyes. He was sitting on the sandy beach of the lake, legs crossed and hands resting softly upon his knees. He noticed he was no longer breathing water, but air. *Did I fail?* He felt every touch of the light breeze on his skin, pulling and pushing gently.

"Can you stand?" Maeve offered her hand to help.

"I think so." He reached for her hand and pulled himself up. His legs wobbled a little and he kicked out to stretch them, one after the other. There was something tangled on his

foot; he reached to pick it up. *My boxers!* Eric was stark naked - and embarrassed. He fumbled to put his shorts back on right away.

Thankfully, Maeve made no comment.

"Did I fail? How did I get out the water?"

"No, you didn't fail." She laughed. "Did you get out of the water, or did the water get out of you? You have withdrawn from each other - how else could we enjoy this beautiful lake?"

Compared to before, Eric felt like his will waved back and resynced, reverberating from the edges of his form. Or perhaps he was just more secure in his identity with his boxer shorts back on.

It was a long day...

Absent-mindedly, Eric reached for a flat stone and threw it horizontally towards the lake. It skipped about a dozen times before it submerged.

Chapter 8 - Ritual Magic

Repetition might not be the mother of learning, but it is the mother of conditioning!

- Spells and Wizardry, Dreamer's Handbook

"Rose, right? I remember you. If you ever visit the Outpost, I'll make sure to find you a mentor in negotiation and diplomacy."

Before Mr. Smith arrived, the three of them were lounging in the benevolent shade of a big tree. Eric felt rested - really rested, as if he slept through a week straight. Through the attunements, he caught a glimpse of the many things going on inside him; he gained confidence and hope for the future ahead. Lucy and Rose seemed to share his contemplative disposition. *Did the girls grow a finger-width taller, or is my memory messing with me?*

"Joe asked me to run you through the basics of ritual magic. It should do you good, especially in light of your recent experiences." Mr. Smith wiped a low-hanging branch out of his face. "Ritual magic makes it easier to channel the elemental energies into their proper places and keep your consciousness finely honed. I have time now, but we could also schedule a class for a later time. Which do you prefer?"

Eric didn't know what ritual magic was, but he enjoyed Mr. Smith's nightmare examination class. Mr. Smith was wearing the same tie-less suit, and even the collar of his shirt was tightly buttoned. *Won't he choke?* As an assurance, Eric ran his fingers through the neckline of his own t-shirt. He noticed Rose and Lucy looking at him, waiting for him to say the decision out loud.

"Sure," Eric said. "We can do it now."

They began to stand up, but Mr. Smith gestured for them to stay and sat down next to them. He cracked his fingers.

"If you ask focus item users, they'll say that ritual magic is an obvious offshoot of focus magic, since concentrating and channeling is the primary domain of focus magic. If you ask elementalists, they will say that ritual magic is part of earth magic, as it deals with formation and stability. There are other theories too, but I prefer a simpler viewpoint." He paused.

"Humans are creatures of habit. You are young and may not fully realize the impact of this statement. As you grow and become more experienced, you'll notice people around you falling into obvious habitual patterns: thought patterns, emotional responses, social

behavior - in about that order. People become predictable, and even worse, they develop a certain blindness towards themselves."

Mr. Smith thumped on his knee.

"Habits are powerful things. If uncontrolled, habits are something that happen to you, something that you fall into. The most devious nightmares appear when your fear gains control of your habits. In such a state, the breaking of habits is of utmost importance."

"Thankfully, habits can be controlled, and moreso, consciously cultivated. On the individual level, most of ritual magic is about harnessing the power of such cultivated habits. Can you tell me what you think a magic spell is?"

Lucy took out her handbook and started flipping through it.

"An incantation," Rose said.

"A formula?" Eric asked.

"An incantation or a written formula is often a part of a spell, but rarely the wholeness of it. If we're talking about a formula in the sense of an algorithm, then we're closer to the mark," Mr. Smith said.

Lucy found what she was looking for and read aloud from the book: "...every magic spell is in fact the habitual application of ritual magic: a string of gestures, movement, mental or emotional steps etc. that can efficiently, reliably, quickly and repeatably lead to the desired magical outcome."

"Hey, that's cheating! You're not supposed to read the answer from the book," Rose said.

Lucy slammed the book shut. "No, it isn't."

"Yes, it is," Rose said emphatically.

Eric rolled his eyes.

"That's a decent definition," Mr. Smith said. "Mastering an individual spell is about conditioning your mind and body to make the familiar steps of achieving a familiar intermediary goal. If you cast a spell a thousand times, and if you pay at least a little attention to what you're doing, you will certainly improve. Practice makes perfect, as they say. From then on, casting that spell will require minimal conscious effort, thus freeing you from the 'how' and enabling you to focus on the goal."

"So, you carve the spell into your brain," Eric said.

"That's an interesting view, if a little simplistic. Yes, the pathways of a spell become carved into your brain through practice. Any questions?"

"Don't we have to memorize spells?" Lucy asked.

"It is common practice for mages to jot down ideas in a spellbook, much like cooks or alchemists collect recipes in a cookbook. Study and memorization are beneficial for researching and designing a spell, but are not integral parts of spellcasting. In other words, a recipe is not enough - it takes a master chef's art and experience to create a culinary marvel."

"That bacon we ate was pretty tasty... just sayin'," Eric whispered to Rose.

"Simple is often better, I agree," Mr. Smith said.

* * *

Again!

Knees slightly bent, Eric stepped back with his right foot, drew his hands to his right hip and pushed out, focusing on the air sphere to contain the fire bursting forth from his hand. He did it the way Ohlson taught him before, but the results were still not satisfactory. *Much better than the flame jet, though.* The fire that left his hand bumped against the magic sphere containing it, curled within it, but the restrictive air shape dissipated soon enough and the fire lashed out in the direction it was travelling towards. The flames flashed, and then disappeared, leaving a trail of smoke which promptly disappeared too.

Eric sighed.

Mr. Smith was sitting under the tree, watching the three of them practice intently. Every now and then he got up to offer advice and suggest adjustments.

Each of them had to pick a basic elemental spell to practice. For Eric, this was naturally the fireball; he already knew what he was supposed to do, but his execution was lacking. Nevertheless, the feeling of fire within him was more in-tune than before, and he knew he would get it right if he kept practicing.

Eric paused for a while to catch his breath and replenish his concentration. He looked over to Lucy and Rose to see if they were making progress.

Rose was able to turn a magic sphere into a large ball of air, which whooshed and went out as a gust of wind. It was impressive to see leaves and dust twirling in the air, but the airball did not pack much of a punch. *Not yet.* Progress was slow, but there was progress.

Lucy was trying to make a waterball. She was unsure whether to pick water or earth as her first element, but after discussing it with Mr. Smith, he agreed to explain to her various ball-type spells of both. Lucy was able to turn the motions of the magic sphere into an internally waving, watery substance that floated above her hand. *Like a spherical glass of water without the glass.* She couldn't hold it for more than a second or two - the water splashed on her palm, poured down from her hand, and soaked into the ground. Her clothes were drenched from all the previous attempts.

Eric took another breath and repeated the process. A fireball flew out if his hand, but the containment shape dispersed and the flames lashed out in the direction of travel.

"That's a nice firebolt. Don't worry, you're making progress," Mr. Smith said to Eric. "You're just trying too forcefully. Here, like this," he stood next to Eric and assumed a similar training pose. "If you're pushing out with both hands, like you're doing now, you're imparting too much force and that makes containment difficult. It's good technique for earth or water personalities, but you already have a lot of fire within. Try positioning one hand under the sphere for stability, and pushing out with the other one as you're used to."

Eric assumed the stance, and when he pulled back his hands to the right side of his hip, the palm of his left hand was facing up. Eric pushed out and let go, following the fireball's path with his eyes. This time it looked much more like a proper fireball, and it traveled a longer distance before flaring out.

"Well done. Keep practicing until you're comfortable with the spell," Mr. Smith said.

"As an alternative, you can put both hands under for stability, and push only with your mind. This way is slower, but you can guide it like a missile if you maintain a more demanding level of concentration. Instead of the fireball flying away from you, imagine part of you flying with it, pushing it to where you want to go."

"You could also try pushing with one hand from the side and positioning one hand above - using the energy from your hand to impart a spin, like you would in table tennis. This helps with containment at the expense of control, but at least the power level doesn't change."

"Thank you," Eric said. He was proud of his success, and eager to try again.

Mr. Smith walked away from Eric and addressed Rose. "Good job, however, your shape is not structurally sound. Don't only weigh down on the rotation from the outside, but also expand to it from the inside. This way, the resistance..."

Eric moved his arms and legs around as an impromptu stretching exercise. He put his hands on his hip, stretched his neck and torso backwards, then around in a circle. He took a deep breath and assumed the familiar stance.

Again!

* * *

Eric caught sight of Kyle and Lyle sneaking around. The two of them hid behind a tree, occasionally peeking out and whispering. Eric pretended not to notice, but kept watching them from the corner of his eye. The brothers sprinted towards a bush, and then hopped behind a young tree, the trunk of which was not wide enough to conceal them completely. The whispering got more spirited, but when a dog's bark was heard in the distance, they stopped jabbering and froze.

Eric carried on with his practice.

Soon enough, Eric saw the two shapes sneaking even closer in a cartoony way: knees raised high, trying to touch the ground only with the tip of their toes and spreading their arms out for balance.

Slipping through shadows in broad daylight, haha.

"Now", Eric heard the not very silent whisper.

In their hands, Kyle and Lyle made a fireball each, pushed the two together into a bigger one, and started charging towards Eric and the others. They roared, and the fireball grew in size as they came closer. It was obvious to Eric they had containment as well as control issues, but since there were two of them steering the spell, the charge continued more or less in a straight line.

"I've got this!" Rose shouted and sent a ball of air flying.

The smaller ball of air entered the unstably large fireball, and like a balloon, it popped. The minor explosion ruffled the boys' hair and sent chunks of fire energy flying. Some of those chunks fell back down on them, leaving charcoal marks on their faces and singeing their clothes. Eric grimaced involuntarily when the smell of burnt hair reached him.

Despite the results, Kyle and Lyle were giggling and grinning as they walked closer, obviously quite satisfied with their prank. "That was great, wasn't it!"

Eric couldn't help but laugh, and so did Lucy and Rose. The charred remains of a leaf landed on Eric's arm, and he brushed it off.

"You're interrupting my class," Mr. Smith said flatly.

The grins waned, and Eric could almost see what went through the pranksters' minds: first a sense of dread, then thoughts scrambling for a witty retort, and finally submission.

"Sorry... we didn't know it was a class." They backed away a few steps.

You don't mess around with a man who doesn't smile.

"Just as well... I might even have use for you. How about you go get the dog while I talk to my students? We will all play a game together," Mr. Smith said, sounding almost ominous.

Kyle was visibly relieved to get off so easy.

"Yes! We'll be right back!" Lyle shouted, already on his way.

Mr. Smith turned to Lucy, Eric and Rose. "So far, we talked about spells as personal rituals based on controlled habits. I won't go in-depth, but I will mention that if there are more people involved, habit is complemented by protocol and various techniques of symbol-weaving, telepathy, and channeling become more useful. Inter-personal rituals can be constructed carefully, relying on the protocol part, but good teams can also 'wing it', so to say, by relying more on the habitual component of their shared history."

"Are we going to practice such a spell?" Lucy asked.

"No, that would be excessive. We're going to focus only on the most important part: teamwork."

"I don't get it," Eric said. "What kind of rituals are these?"

"An inter-personal ritual can range from opening a faraway portal and summoning a major demon, to organized druidic sanctification of land or the more esoteric rituals of reality-weaving... It can be anything really. Powerful spells that are not too time-sensitive are often performed collectively. Even the compounded fireball those noise-makers made counts as such a ritual."

"So, what are we going to do then?" Eric asked.

"We're going to play catch," replied Mr. Smith, and turned his head in the direction of a loud bark.

Strangely, the two riders on top of Duke were silent this time, and they remained silent even after dismounting. *They must've used up their daily noise allowance.* Duke went around to each member of the group, greeting with a sniff and getting a pat in return. Even Mr. Smith patted Duke, and the dog quietly curled up by his side.

Mr. Smith extended his hand in front of him. A fireball appeared, floating above his palm. He looked at Lyle, shouted "Catch!", and threw the fireball to him in a gentle arc.

Lyle caught the ball with both hands.

"Good. Now throw it to someone else."

Lyle grinned, swung his arm back, and threw the fireball with full strength at Rose.

"Hey!" She dodged.

"I said throw to, not throw at!" Mr. Smith reprimanded. He made another fireball and tossed it to Kyle.

Kyle threw it to Rose; she caught it and passed it to Eric.

Eric held out both hands in front of him, preparing to catch with his hands as well as his mind - this was, after all, the spell he was practicing for hours. It was smaller and less powerful than the ones he made, but the rotations of the sphere containing the fire were adequate. He easily continued those movements in his imagination and caught the fireball. The fire in it was similar to the feeling of his own fire, and now in full control of the spell, he threw the ball to Lucy as delicately as he could.

"Ouch, burning!" Lucy caught the fireball, but dropped it at once. It fell to the ground and dispersed.

"That's alright," Mr. Smith said and made yet another fireball.

When the ball got to Lucy, she dropped it again, and the scenario repeated itself several times. On the fourth try, Lucy caught the fireball by letting her hand slide into the center of it - it looked like her hand was a torch. She waved her hand in Mr. Smith's direction, and the fireball flew off. She smiled with relief.

After everyone's confidence broadened, Mr. Smith switched to an airball.

Rose did not so much catch, but deflect with elegance. Lucy handled it without problems, too.

When it got to Kyle or Lyle, the airball spread out and weakened, but when they passed it on, it narrowed and strengthened again.

"Don't just throw the ball and forget about it; this is a team exercise. Follow it, guide it, and offer control to the person you're throwing it to. When you're catching, you're claiming control. When you're throwing, you're bestowing control. Feel the ebb and flow of the spell's energies, and make it as easy for your teammates as you can."

There was too much movement and speed in the airball for Eric to comprehend it fully. He focused on the parts of it that he understood, kept it from falling apart, and passed it on as soon as he could.

"What if someone works against us?" Rose asked.

"In that case, the push and pull becomes a battle of minds. It can be very hard to claim control over a hostile spell. Dispelling it by exploiting the structure of the spell is easier. At least one dispel ritual should be part of your arsenal, but master the basics first and worry about the rest later."

The waterball was next on the menu. When Lucy pitched, it seemed to Eric like moving stillness; translucent and ethereal. However, when he had to catch, it just shifted around his hand before slipping away and splattering on the ground.

After several tries, he came up with a trick: he imagined catching and throwing, catching and throwing, and so on many times as the ball of water flew towards him. It was a strange feeling, like when a raindrop shatters into even smaller drops: each reflecting light similarly, but separately. Despite the strangeness, it worked, and Eric managed to pass the ball on without splattering.

Kyle and Lyle had no such insight, and the waterball splashed on their hands every single time. They grew increasingly restless and began deliberately hitting it, aiming for the splatter to soak someone else.

"That will be enough. I think we covered the basics," Mr. Smith said. "We also trained a lot, and as far as I'm concerned, the class is finished. How do you feel about homework?"

"If we could-"

A resounding "NO!" from the rest of the group drowned Lucy's voice out.

Chapter 9 - Blade Magic

Attitude is everything. A keen observer may predict the doom or triumph of any endeavor based on the attitude of the person who undertakes it. Be wary of fixed points, and mastering the attitude of no-attitude will grant you unpredictability.

- From Attitude to Magic,
Dreamer's Handbook

"Thank you for coming with me!" Eric was excited.

"Of course, we promised Ohlson," Rose said.

Eric enjoyed sword-fighting scenes in movies, and especially liked ones with samurai swords. First he thought Ohlson's class would be about some boring subject, but his indifference vanished when he found out it was about blades.

"I didn't promise anything and you still dragged me along," Lucy said.

"You'd just be mad at us again if we left you out," Eric said.

"That may be true, but you promised me I could pick out the next class we go to, yet here we are... in a class not of my choosing."

"Come on, look at how happy he is," Rose pointed to Eric. "He's almost drooling. Besides, did you actually say which class you want to attend next? I bet you haven't even decided yet."

"Well..." Lucy stomped her foot, "that doesn't mean I don't want to be asked!"

"You're such a wuss sometimes." Rose moved closer to Lucy and whispered loudly in her ear. "Admit it, deep down you know it's true. Say: 'I'm a crybaby!'"

Lucy chuckled. She leaned aside, grabbed Rose by the forehead and playfully pushed her away.

They were standing in a clearing with about a dozen more kids. Ohlson was hauling a large watermelon from a nearby cart to a large, wooden table. A few kids ran to help him unload smaller melons; the atmosphere was more that of a picnic than a class.

Eric was eyeing those juicy melons - but he wasn't the only one doing so.

"Yes, these are for you," Ohlson answered the kids clamoring around the table, "but only after class is over! First we study, then we celebrate. Go! Go!" Ohlson shooed them away from the table.

Ohlson pressed down nervously on his palm. After tiptoeing around, he raised his hands, cleared his throat, and yelled out: "May I have your attention please!" The commotion quickly subsided. "Uhmm... This class is about blade magic... and, this is my first class ever as a teacher... so I hope we get along and learn a lot together!"

Ohlson paused, expecting some kind of reaction from his audience.

There was no fidgeting and everyone's attention was on Ohlson - until Rose started clapping and the group burst into cheer.

"Thank you! I'm not sure I deserve it, but I'll do my best."

Eric was happy to see how such a small gesture eased Ohlson's tension.

Ohlson grabbed a shining sword from the table and held it in front of him. "This is my friend and mentor, Dancing Feather. He's the real teacher of this class, and he'll help you see the possibilities of blade magic."

He's talking about the sword as if it were a person...

"To understand blade magic, we have to take a look at the parts, sometimes called aspects, of a blade. The four notable parts are: the point, the edge, the flat and the handle."

Ohlson pointed to the tip of the sword with his empty hand. "The point is for stabbing, piercing, or puncturing. While not all blades have a point, such as the chakram, most of them do. The point provides precision and versatility."

"The edge is for cutting and slashing. It is the defining part of the blade - if there's no edge, your tool or weapon is not a blade. Mastery of the edge is difficult and wrought with peril, but worth the effort."

Ohlson tapped the side of the blade lightly with a knuckle. "The flat or face is the part that holds the other three aspects together. It is the material part of the blade, but it does not necessarily have to be of the earth element: lightsabres, flaming or vorpal swords have other substance."

He pointed to the handle of the sword and gripped it more tightly. "The point, edge and flat are the wholeness of the blade. The handle breaks this wholeness by adding an interface to a greater wholeness: the user of the blade. Good bladesmen regard the blade to be an extension of their bodies, while great bladesmen regard themselves as extensions of the blade."

Ohlson swung the blade around several times, making modest, but deliberate movements.

"A master of blade magic is not a specialist in the way swordsmen, lumberjacks or surgeons are. A master blade mage uses the essence of the blade rather than a particular implementation of it - such a master can cut without slashing, puncture without piercing and grasp without holding. For us less capable blade magic users, a blade also serves as a focus item."

Lucy raised her hand. "You mean, like a wand?"

Olson frowned. "Wands are for weakli-- never mind, I take that back. Yes, a blade can do everything a wand does, and more. Why anyone would prefer a wand instead of a blade is beyond me... Everyone, stand up and spread out! If you have shoes or socks on, take them off. We'll practice a simple kata."

Eric stood up, and he was snickering.

"What!?" Lucy exclaimed.

"Nothing," Eric said. "Isn't it obvious that wands are silly?"

Lucy put her hands on her hips and stared at Eric. "Oh, really?!"

Eric nodded.

In books and movies it was always a clumsy kid vanquishing dark monsters with the flicker of a wand - and Eric hated that. *There's no gracefulness. It's like they pretend the magic is in the wand, and not in the person.*

"Well then, guess which class we'll be taking next! Yeah, that's right; focus magic! You promised, remember?"

Eric frowned. He looked to Rose, hoping for some backup.

"I like wands," Rose said plainly.

Eric rolled his eyes. "All right..."

* * *

The kata Ohlson was demonstrating was a simple one, but it took Eric a while to remember the sequence of positions. There was a flow to Ohlson's movements, and Eric

felt his own execution was choppy and disjointed - he very much doubted he was doing it the proper way.

He makes it look so easy.

Paying attention to posture, timing, and muscles flexing in unison was hard. Several times, Eric caught himself holding his breath while he concentrated on getting a single motion right. It was a small satisfaction that everyone was at least as terrible.

A funny looking kid next to Eric fared worst. He was wearing a small and colorful suit that was supposed to be a giant, cartoonish robot. He had a matching helmet on with only small slits for the eyes, and the boy could barely coordinate his own movements.

"Hey, I'm Eric. What's your name?"

The kid raised a fist and mumbled through his helmet: "I'm Atron, defender of dreams!"

"Oh, what a powerful title! Defending dreams is tough work, isn't it? Say, how about you take that helmet off to see better?"

"No, that's my head! You want me to take my *head* off?"

"Look, I'll help you, just..." Eric reached for the helmet.

"No!" Atron, the defender of dreams, dashed away from Eric. He looked back and tilted his head in the meanest way he could.

Did he just stick his tongue out? Great, that's what I get for trying to help.

Eric walked over to Rose, explained the situation, and asked her to handle it. After she agreed, Eric returned to his spot. He tried to get into the rhythm of the kata, which was easy, because he didn't have much sense of the rhythm in the first place.

After more practice, the girl in front turned to him and offered the same sword Ohlson used for demonstration.

"Here, it's your turn! Take it!"

* * *

Eric gripped the sword. A refreshingly cool feeling swam up his arm, which was followed by a feeling of pleasant warmth. In several seconds, the alternatingly intense

combo of sensations enveloped his whole body. He felt a jolt of electricity from the sword and a touch of radiant light upon his awareness. Instinctively, Eric straightened his spine.

"Greetings! Eric. I am the identity essence of the sword you are gripping, known as Dancing Feather."

"Uh, hello."

"I see you are not overly familiar with telepathy or mental vocalization. That's allowable; you can proceed to use physical vocalization while communing with me on the conscious level. Are your existential attributes within the parameters of comfort?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Excellent. To proceed with the teaching demonstration, I require your consent. If you agree, I will assume co-control of some of your physical, mental and emotional processes. This will be done mainly to present you with my perspective and focus your attention at relevant points. Do I have your consent?"

"Uh, I guess."

"Inadequate reply. To avoid any potential misunderstanding or control issues, I require a clear 'yes' answer to proceed. A 'no' answer or a similar one will abort our communion and the sword will be released from your hand. Yes or no?"

"Yes. Why are you talking like that?"

"I'm not talking, since I have no human speech organs, but I am communicating. If you're referring to my syntactical patterns, please excuse my deficiencies, as the linguistic context of your language is within my domain, but the social context is not. I will do my best to... speak... normally."

The light in Eric's head shifted a hue.

"If you ever encounter a cursed or demonic blade, focus on the handle aspect. It symbolizes your own distinctive sphere of influence, and can be used to curtail the intrusion of the channeled malicious entity. With me, a simple vocalization stating a desire to abort will suffice."

"I will now demonstrate three aspects of the blade: the face, the point and the edge. Are you ready to start?"

"Yes."

"He who dies by the blade, lives by the blade. This is the attitude of the blade." The voice paused.

"Know thyself!"

With the blade extending horizontally from his hands, Eric raised the sword to his right and up to eye level. As he slowly turned it to a vertical position, the rays of the sun reflected, like through a prism, from the face of the sword right into his eyes. He was momentarily blinded, and the touch of light upon his awareness engulfed his mind.

The moment passed, and Eric's mind struggled to categorize the insight of the previous instant: he saw himself as a collection of systems - the blood flowing in his veins, the bones of his skeleton, the muscles upon them, nerves branching out. Not only that, he saw a categorization of his feelings, a name and label for many of them, the map and imprint of language on his thoughts, and symbols describing his inner self. Eric's body froze as his mind did its best to deal with the overload of self-reflection. The memory slowly faded back to the realm of subconscious, and he regained his time-sense.

"Balance thyself!"

Eric placed one foot in front of the other, and the blade in his hands came down from up high and into a forward thrust.

Even though there was nothing but air in front of him, Eric felt the force of the stab disperse like thousands of tiny needle-stabs on and under his skin, each of them pushing and pulling energy in tiny to large vortices. It wasn't particularly painful, but the experience of how these points connected into lines was peculiar - like his sense of self was shaken then calmed again.

"Change thyself!"

Eric stepped back, whirled the sword once around his wrist, stepped forward and carried the motion of the sword into a slightly diagonal forward slash.

This time, the cutting motion sliced and diced his sense of self into long, vibrant lines of energy. Each line was like the edge of an unseen blade. Rather than being a frightening experience, it felt like dirt being threshed out of a delicately woven carpet. The luminous lines not only divided, but also unified, restoring the sense of self - a new self! - and a degree of freedom and clarity. Dying by the sword now seemed like a purposeful, desired action.

"Control thyself."

At the end of the kata, Eric stood motionless. Yet, he felt it was not over yet, the momentum still carrying him forth.

Anger swelled up inside him. It caught him by surprise, since he was not generally prone to fits of anger, nor had he any reason to be angry. As the anger intensified, Eric saw it's not really anger, but rage. It came from a side of him he never encountered before, yet there was something base about it that was distinctly and recognizably a part of his identity. He struggled to contain it, but it grew even more powerful. *It's not rage either.* He stepped aside from its path, letting it through rather than resisting it. *Aggression. Pure lifeforce.* With recognition came acceptance, and the force acquiesced - becoming part of Eric again. He was one with himself.

"Awesome! What else can you show me?"

* * *

Eric focused on a watermelon at the table farther away. It was partly occluded by a smaller melon of the muskier kind. He gripped the sword firmly with his right hand and placed his left hand softly on the lower side of the blade. His stance was flawless; not even a strong push could make him lose his footing and a sense of purpose emanated from the way he was present in the posture of his body. Knees slightly bent; all the right muscles tense and ready.

As he concentrated on the watermelon, he noticed increasingly delicate details: this pattern here, that unevenness there. He could practically feel it under his touch; the hard, green exterior and the crunchy, tasty, water-filled interior. He knew what kind of sound it would give when tapped on, and how strong its internal vibration would be. The large fruit was alive, interweaved with lines of its own energies.

Eric looked within, and in his mind's eye, cut himself apart with a strong, clean slash. He pushed this feeling outside of himself, and accentuated it by letting the edge of his sword carry it. He stepped and slashed forward, following the momentum.

The watermelon on the table split in half without sound, and the halves wobbled slightly until they settled in a still resting state.

Eric let his focus go, and the distance became apparent to him once again. He lowered the sword, approached the table and inspected the watermelon. It was a clean cut. A few drops of juice dripped onto the table, but there were no cut marks on either the tabletop or the musky melon in front.

He smiled with satisfaction.

* * *

"Hand me over."

Dancing Feather has mostly withdrawn, and Eric felt like the light has been turned off in his mind; not completely dark, but certainly dimmed.

On one hand, the receding awareness faded out insights and this was an experience of loss for Eric. On the other hand, enduring the intensity wasn't easy - adherence to such a degree of perfection was also a burden. All in all, Eric felt relieved and welcomed the emptiness.

"I will. I just need a moment to compose myself."

It was interesting how little time has passed. The communion couldn't have taken longer than several minutes, yet Eric's mind was telling him that hours, maybe days, worth of experiences have passed.

Eric observed his surroundings, mostly to assure himself of his own place in it.

Ohlson kept demonstrating the kata, pausing a little between repetitions to watch over his students. No one seemed to be doing particularly better than before; Lucy practiced a single motion over and over, while Rose strung the beginning and end of the kata together and made a clumsy dance out of it.

Compared to what Dancing Feather showed him, differences between various attitudes and performances were glaring. Despite such knowledge, Eric wasn't sure he could do better by himself, since there were myriad details to pay attention to.

Eric noticed someone tugging at his sleeve. It was Atron, the defender of dreams - this time without the helmet. The boy had dark blond hair and freckles on his face. He was about Lyle's age.

"Who are you talking to?"

Eric raised the blade slightly. "I'm talking to this sword right here."

"Oh." The boy eyed Eric suspiciously. "You can do that?"

"Yes. This is a very smart sword; it speaks like shiny reflections in your head. It showed me many things, but says I have to learn to do those things by myself."

"I see... Well, I just wanted to say I'm sorry about before. My real name is Aaron, and this is just a costume. I hope we can train together or something... It was really cool how you cut that melon in two!"

"Thanks, Aaron. My name is Eric. I'd be happy to train with you."

"Mission success!" Aaron raised his fist high and stood in a triumphant-giant-robot pose.

"Do you want to talk to the sword? Here, grab it. Use both hands!"

Chapter 10 - Earth Attunement

Fire, air, water, earth. Another way of looking at it is: will, space, identity, form.

Form is perhaps the most notable attribute of the earth element, however, resistance is that which allows structure, and therefore form to exist. Can limitation offer stability, and paradoxically, greater choice?

- Earth, Dreamer's Handbook

"Do you have time? I'd like to ask you about something," Lucy said.

"Shoot!" Annie said.

"How can I attune to the earth element? I browsed the Earth section of the Dreamer's Handbook, but there's nothing about attunement in there."

"Don't overeat."

"What? Why? Do I look fat?"

Eric chuckled, and sat down next to Rose on the edge of the cliff. It was the same cliff where they learned to fly.

Rose was letting her legs swing.

"No, not at all!" Annie laughed. "It's a funny story. I had a student who tried to bring more of the earth element into the dream realm by overeating before sleep. What's worse, he shared his 'insight' with friends, and there they were, full-bellied, grunting and groaning through my class..." Annie shook her head. "Anyway, you look lovely!"

"Ah, thanks... Gross story... So, how do I attune to earth?"

"Well, there is a realm where the elemental balance is dominated by the earth element, and we're all intimately familiar with it - called 'real life'. You are already attuned to earth; you don't have to do anything."

Eric was listening to the conversation going on behind him, but not with full attention, as he was also looking at Rose creating the cutest little pulses of gust, kind of reminding him of rings of cigarette smoke. By association, the disgusting memory-smell of cigarette surfaced within him, and he pushed it back into his subconscious. "Wahh," he grimaced while exhaling.

"Mastering earth in the dream realm requires not attunement, but balance. Living life in the earth-based realm and then jumping into a dream in an air-based realm creates a gap in perception between the two realms, and this lack of balance affects the experience of reality in both realms. Most people find it quite difficult to remember their dreams in real life - or their real life in dreams - because of this disparity."

"The secret is simply to be clear and healthy. If your physical body is balanced and cared for in your earthly life, you will find it easier to think, feel, and imagine. It works the other way around too: by having clear thoughts and loving feelings, your reality won't be weighed down and distorted. There's an old Latin saying for this... what was it... 'mens sana' something..." Annie massaged her head with her fingertips, ruffling her hair a little. "Eh, I can't recall."

To match Rose's pulsing gusts, Eric made tiny fireballs in quick succession. They formed, flew and burst out not more than an arm's length away. Their short, flaming life was a relaxing contrast with the sunny greenery and vast open space below. *It is a nice view*, Eric acknowledged.

"I'm not very good with earth magic, but I can show you some simple spells if you want," Annie offered.

"That would be great!"

Eric turned around to sneak a peek of what Annie was doing.

She grabbed a big handful of earth from the ground and threw it up. The bigger, grassier chunks fell down quickly, but a dusty cloud of dirt remained. Annie created a magic sphere amidst the descending cloud, and the tiny particles of dust got drawn into its motion.

"This is the classic dirtball."

All the dust from the cloud got packed into the sphere, where it shifted around in quicksand-like motion.

"Doing pure earth magic in an air realm is quite difficult. This kind of spell is a compromise - a cheat if you will. Instead of creating form from scratch, we use forms that are abundant in the realm and just add on a spell layer that gets the job done. Using bigger pieces is progressively more difficult. A dirtball is not very useful by itself, but you can use the same principle with earth-based shield spells or offensive shard projectiles."

"Can I try?"

"Sure."

Lucy knelt down, dug her fingers into the soil and tore out a big piece of the ground. She stood up and threw it above her head. Immediately after, she made a magic sphere which sucked in some of the dust, but not all. The rest of the cloud fell slowly to the ground.

What she was left holding looked like a very dirty magic sphere, not resembling Annie's dirtball at all.

"Don't worry, it takes practice to notice and grab the tiny particles with your mind, and sweep them up in the motion you want. It's a good start."

Lucy let the sphere dissipate, and rubbed her hands to get rid of the dirt. "Is that all?"

"Well, I can show you a proper earth sphere too, but it's difficult even for me. It might take a while."

"I don't mind, I'd like to see."

"Okay."

Eric, who followed the demonstration only intermittently, felt a foot slamming into his side.

"Pay attention, this should be interesting," Lucy said.

Eric stood up reluctantly and stepped away from the edge. Rose did the same, and she was rubbing the side of her back too.

Annie made a large magic sphere, with its circles and rotations clearly visible to Eric. It shrunk, expanded again, and repeated the process each time slightly faster than before. It looked like there were two spheres, one expanding and one contracting, and then they would switch directions. They were moving quite fast. *Three spheres... no, four... five...* all changing into one another. Eric lost track and stared at the strange, self-moving shape without trying to understand it.

"The goal is to pack the motions into a form that is stable. If it is stable, that means the earth mage doesn't have to concentrate on maintaining form with awareness and imagination alone. That's a plus. The stability of form is often measured and tested by its resistance to change: if it is too resistant, the mage has to invest energy into changing it again for her own purposes. That's a minus."

The sphere condensed into some kind of metallic fluid; waving, making perturbations and spiky protrusions. With a final wave, the metallic ball 'clicked' into motionlessness, and fell into Annie's palm.

"This thing's heavy, catch."

Eric caught the ball with one hand, and it immediately pulled him down. It felt like metal, looked like metal, smelled like metal. He used both hands for support and lobbed the thing to Lucy.

Lucy passed it to Rose, who passed it to Annie again.

"Neat, huh? Also not very useful, unless you have great hand strength or a cannon to go along with it. Practical earth magic is about creating forms that are stable in some directions and unstable in others, so the mage may control through the path of least resistance. The earth element is well suited as a component in complex spells, but the spells of other elements can be easier to use and more directly appliable in simpler situations. Especially in air-based realms."

"Can you make it heavier?" Eric asked.

"I can compound more mass, yes."

"How heavy can you make it?"

"I dunno, let's see."

Annie tossed the ball up and it remained floating above her hand. Its surface turned liquid and began pulsating once more.

Giant, barely perceptible magic spheres faded in from seemingly everywhere; the rotating edges came from the sky and the horizon, passed through Eric and the others, and now strong, sunk beneath the surface of the metallic liquid. One after the other, the whole world seemed to be pulsing only to shrink and bombard the space above Annie's hand.

"I'm approaching my limit. The awareness differential between this form and its background is diminishing - I can't push it much further."

There was a sound too: a hissing, high-pitched sound. Eric couldn't see the ball anymore; there was only the world shining light into Annie's hand and the darkness which swallowed it. That spherical darkness somehow broke space around it, grew, and began twirling into itself.

"Oh shit oh shit," Annie's mouth was moving fast, but the sound took a long time to reach Eric's ears.

Eric felt nauseous. He looked at his hands: they were elongated and putty-like, waving and being drawn spirally towards the black hole. His head ached like someone dropped a brick on it.

"I lost control... Get back! Run!" Annie yelled.

Chapter 11 - Portal Magic

The holographic principle states that any number of dimensions equals any number of dimensions. When the local supersymmetry breaks in order to accommodate awareness, dimensional collapse occurs.

1D to 0D is a distinguishable point. 2D to 0D is a circle or torus, and 2D to 1D is a line or polarity field. 3D to 0D is a black hole, 3D to 1D is a field along a line, and 3D to 2D is a field along a plane. For an extensive list of meta-geometrical shapes resolving in various observed dimensions, as well as related fractal imagery, consult a reality-weaver.

- Zeno Walks Funny: The Holographic Principle and the Folding Equations, Dreamer's Handbook

"When making a portal, you have to prop it up from within to create a contained collapse and not a total breakdown. You know that," Master Joe said.

"I wasn't trying to make a portal..." Annie's tone was low and her body tense.

"Oh? What were you doing then?"

"Trying to make the heaviest sphere I could."

Master Joe laughed. "Isn't that something!"

"Raw talent is worthless if your knowledge of theory is lacking," Mr. Smith remarked.

Annie clenched her lips and bowed her head. A tear escaped her eye.

"There, there," Master Joe raised a hand to Annie's face. "He meant to say you have more potential than you give yourself credit for. You could pack this whole realm into a sphere and you still wouldn't reach your limit."

Annie was crying. "No, it's true... I have less brains than talent," she sobbed, and grasped Master Joe's hand.

Master Joe drew her close and embraced her in a hug. "You have skill and you have brains too. Talent is just a useless word," he consoled. "No harm's done. Johnny and I will find out what went wrong, and until then, how about you familiarize the youngsters with portal magic? It's not every day they see something like this. Can you do that?"

Annie slowly nodded and reinforced it by saying "Yes." She stepped back, wiped her tears, and turned away to compose herself.

Eric, Rose and Lucy watched the adults' commotion silently. When Annie told them to run, they did, but they didn't get very far before Master Joe and Mr. Smith showed up. The strange, twisting and nauseating feeling vanished at once, and all was right with the world.

Except for the area with Annie's handiwork. Part of it dark, part of it light - a semi-translucent contortion of space was floating violently near the edge of the cliff. When he gazed long enough, Eric thought he could see geometrical shapes within, but every subsequent moment the twisting void would change into something else that defied not only Eric's description of it, but also his comprehension.

Annie walked back to them, her face showing masked evidence of crying and a forced smile. "I messed that up, didn't I? I guess I'm not the one who should be chastising others for being irresponsible." She shook her head and facepalmed.

Eric chose to interpret the question as rhetorical, and remained silent. He did feel a tinge of guilt, since he was the one who asked Annie to push it further, but he wasn't going to beat himself up about it.

Rose and Lucy did not seem too phased either. They were still breathing heavily as an aftermath of their minds switching suddenly in and out of survival mode, but they were just startled rather than afraid.

"Anyway... portal magic has all these theories and interpretations that you have to study if you want to make a portal. Personally, I find teleportation much easier, but if you want to teleport a lot of people, especially back and forth across different realms, making a portal is the way to go. I studied a few theories that work with the air element, but obviously you can make a portal through the earth element as well if you're not careful..." Annie pointed to the mysterious space-bending thing and frowned. "Live and learn."

"Here's how I understood the basics... Imagine a circle, just floating around in the middle of nothingness. Look at it, and then zoom out more and more, until you get bored: the view from this perspective is called a 'point'. Now pick another circle, and look at the circumference of the circle. Zoom in, more and more, until you get bored. What you see is called a 'line'. Now, pick a point and throw a bunch of lines at it. Depending on how many lines you threw together, what you get is that-many-dimensional space. Easy, right?"

"I don't get it."

Annie sighed. "It's like nothing is really nothing, right? Even the nothing is a sandwich of perspectives, a bunch of circles stitched together, moving and waving and looking. When you make a portal, you're just magnifying a connection that's already there, and you make it stable so you don't really have to work at that level anymore."

"That sounds really strange."

"Yeah, I know. That's why symbol-weavers make all these theories; to make it less strange for portal mages to work with. I don't know how else to explain..." Annie's face brightened. "We have a master symbol-weaver right here, we'll ask him."

Annie stepped towards Mr. Smith with a raised hand and about to ask a question, but he and Master Joe were engaged in a discussion. She waited for a more opportune spot to interrupt.

"...should we just draw the shaman in and teach him a lesson?"

"I like the way you think, but he's not alone anymore. Skillful little booger, tunneling below the fluctuations of the realm and hijacking the anomaly... We could be wasting a valuable opportunity."

Mr. Smith stood silent for a few moments. "A show of force, then?"

"That's more like it! We could..." Master Joe noticed Annie standing there awkwardly. "Yes?"

"I was hoping Mr. Smith could shed some light on the connection between portal magic and symbol-weaving. I'm afraid I'm just confusing the kids."

Master Joe waved Mr. Smith down before he could reply. "I'll go, keep an eye here and we'll compare plans after."

Annie walked back to the kids with Master Joe.

"Portal magic is an advanced subject; it can make you crazy if you try too hard to understand it. How about a joke instead? It goes like this..."

* * *

A mathematician goes for a walk, carves the formula "v = s / t" onto the trunk of a tree, and walks on by.

Later on, a physicist walks by the same tree, notices the carving, and says to himself: "Velocity equals distance per time, what a practical equation! If I measure two of the variables, I can calculate the third for free!" He walks away.

A generalist mage walks by the tree, notices the carving, and says to himself: "Imagination equals space per time, what a useful operational precept! By centering myself, my imagination can move the world!" He walks away.

A portal mage, who hopes to be a reality-weaver one day, walks by the tree, notices the carving, and says to himself: "Awareness is supersymmetry per broken symmetry, what a deep realization! Thanks to it, I can spread my identity across multiple realities and enact portals." He walks away.

A zen practitioner walks by the tree and notices the carving. He shakes his fist, and speaks out loudly: "It's that vandal mathematician again!"

* * *

Master Joe was slapping his knees and laughing so hard he was almost rolling on the ground. Annie stood there awkwardly with a polite smile on her face. *Was that supposed to be a joke? I bet the old guy's just trolling us.*

Lucy was lost in her thoughts, but Rose seemed amused. Master Joe's enjoyment was genuine, and his odd behavior prompted Eric to start laughing too. *The old guy is hilarious, even if his joke sucks.* Laughter infected Rose, then Lucy and Annie as well.

"Funny, right?" Master Joe was obviously proud of the joke and its successful telling. He was rewarded by reluctant nods and smiling faces.

"Would you care to explain the meaning of this story?" Lucy asked.

Master Joe shook his head and waved dismissively. "Jokes don't have to make sense to be funny. Portal magic is an advanced subject anyway; you kids should just focus on having fun." He pointed to Annie. "You, however, should look into the higher order analogues of equations, especially the earth related ones. You could start with Einstein's famous '$E = mc^2$'."

"Why that one?" Annie asked, but she didn't receive an answer and started mumbling to herself. "Hmm... square of c... solving for m... folding by fixed measure... Oh, so that's what I did! That's what they mean by making a portal through the earth element!"

"Indeed," Joe confirmed. "As they say, one stone in the hand is worth two in the bush. Still, you're approximating circles with squares, so remember to normalize your equations to keep errors from popping up in the wrong places."

Eric very much doubted that was a real saying.

In the real world, when adults talked about things he didn't understand or care about, Eric would just let it pass over. *They talk about stupid things, anyway.* Here, it was a little different for him: like the persons talking carried a torch through his mind. Eric would see little images of ideas, and the things they talked about made some sense to him while they were talking. After the torch disappeared into the darkness, things were back to not making sense.

It wasn't that ideas ran away from him, but more like he somehow failed to catch them with the framework of his understanding. *Like the scent of a flower you smell for a moment, and then it's gone.* He found the experience interesting.

"Come, I'll show you," Master Joe said to Annie, gesturing as the two of them walked towards the anomaly. "You see that part there? The rippling hasn't steadied yet. That direction has to be magnified and stabilized for the portal to be functional, and after..."

Chapter 12 - Focus Magic

Take energy from the inner world, push it through the focus item, and achieve the desired result in the outer world - this is the age-old method of focus magic that was tried and tested many times over. If you prefer not only to use, but also understand, consider these questions: What happens if the process is reversed? More strangely, what happens if your identity is neither the cause nor the effect, but rather the object of focus?

- Focus and Flow of Energy,
Dreamer's Handbook

"Focus magic is all about focus items: wands, staves, scepters, crystals and even special purpose items such as voodoo dolls," Maeve said.

The class was taking place inside a wide circle, the boundary of which was marked by small stones. Four large, square-shaped slabs of rock occupied the center of the henge. Students were standing next to three of the stone tables, and Maeve was sitting on the fourth.

Eric tapped on the flat surface beneath his hands. *I hope this won't be the worst class ever.* He recalled and went through the memory of the most boring classes he had in real life. *On second thought, it would be hard to top those.*

Piles of staves, wands and crystals towered behind Maeve on the table. She turned around and grabbed a modest-looking wand.

"The basic function of a wand is to provide a baseline for magic spells. This wand here, see, is made of wood and it is one of the simpler types. A makeshift wand may be nothing more than the twig of a tree, but for the long term, it's better to use a well-crafted and personalized tool."

Maeve swept her hand along the length of the wand, almost caressing it.

"It is important to choose the material carefully. Wood is good, living material which interacts well with most energies a mage or witch operates with. Glass and metal make wands which may be better for specific spells. Just don't use plastic," Maeve chuckled, "those damn things will melt in your hand! Animal bones, too, are frequently crafted into focus items, but I'm not fond of such."

Maeve hopped down from the table and started rummaging through a pile of crystals.

The fourth person at Eric, Rose and Lucy's table was a black-haired girl. She was so little she had to stand on another stone to comfortably look down on the top of the table.

Her hair was straight and long, and her eyes deep. She bobbed her head once in a while as if she was listening to music.

"Crystals and gems are the other major group of focus items. They are the filters and batteries of magic." Maeve grabbed several crystals and proceeded to hand them out to students.

"The most notable attribute of crystals is clarity. When magical energies are focused upon them, crystals interact or resonate only with a narrow band of energies. Although this may seem wasteful at first glance, it makes them quite suitable as focus items. The mage has to focus on that clear, narrow band of energies, and this increases the spell's precision and reliability."

Eric touched the crystal Maeve placed in front of him. It glowed dimly, but the glow vanished as soon as he removed his finger. *Interesting.*

"Crystals are often great at storing magical energy. Since the focused energy has already been purified, it is easier for the crystalline structure to withstand greater amounts of it. A fully charged gem or crystal is vivid and full of color, and may even emit a faint light. Crystals may become volatile if improperly charged - handle them with care."

The little girl giggled. She held up her crystal, which glowed under her touch, and pointed at herself. "Gem - Gemma."

"So adorable! How old are you?" Rose asked.

"This many!" Gemma raised three fingers, and went on to raise and lower them randomly.

Eric smiled, and turned his attention to the crystal in front of him. He scooped it up from the cold stone into his palm, and watched lights dance at the bottom. He elevated his hand, and when he tilted it at a particular angle, the brilliance of the sun's rays reflected in the crystal. It felt almost weightless.

"Let's see if you can figure out on your own how to charge a crystal," Maeve instructed the class. "Try not to break it!"

Heh, this will be easy. Eric imagined the energy from his hand going into the crystal and filling it up. It grew brighter, and encouraged Eric to concentrate more.

The crystal started pulsing. It brightened and dimmed, and with each ebbing phase, Eric felt some of his energy return to him. Eric kept at it, and the pulsing crystal began vibrating with a slight hum.

Yes! It must be working!

He continued stuffing energy into it. The pulsation grew more rapid and the hum became a high pitch.

Almost there! Eric put both his hands below the crystal, and watched the crystal jitter. One second... two... the pitch became so high he stopped hearing it... three... four... and crack! The crystal splintered and flew off his palm with a puff.

Damn. I thought I had it.

"You are trying too hard. Don't do it like that."

Eric looked up and saw Maeve standing next to him. "No?"

"No. You're trying to put your own energy into the crystal. It might work, but even if you hit the crystal's signature frequency, you will likely mess up its self-resonance and break it into pieces anyway. Forget this approach; precision comes before power."

Maeve moved closer. "Just listen to it. Feel its clarity. Let it speak to you. Then, once you see it clearly in your mind, focus on such clarity in yourself, and reflect it back onto the crystal. Don't charge the crystal - help it charge itself. Okay?"

"Okay."

Maeve placed another crystal in front of Eric, identical to the first one.

Eric grabbed the crystal with both hands. *If I'm not supposed to push energy into it, maybe it works if I push energy through it.*

He imagined a flow of energy from his right hand to his left. The crystal glowed, but it didn't pulsate, not even when he increased his concentration. It felt warmer, as if a breeze carried warmth from one hand to the other. Despite his efforts, he couldn't get it to glow as bright as with the previous method. He placed the crystal on the stone again, and the glow faded as soon as he removed his hands. *Hmm, that isn't enough.*

Eric heard a yell and the sound of a crystal breaking coming from another table. *Hehehe, at least I'm not the only one.*

Eric decided to make the energy go around inside the crystal. Its brightness increased, but so did the amount of heat it gave off. *It feels sticky.*

He kept at it until the crystal overheated and turned into a gooey substance in quick transition. It slipped out of Eric's fingers and went splat on the stone surface.

"Ahh!" Eric exhaled sharply as his concentration ceased. *Double damn, that's the second one! Even Gemma is doing better.*

Maeve came by and placed another crystal in front of him. "Take it easy." She tapped Eric on the shoulder before walking to another pupil.

Lucy held up her crystal, which shined with a full charge, and smiled provocatively. "Are you enjoying the class?"

"Oh, shut up," Eric said.

* * *

How am I supposed to hold a wand anyway?

The wand was too thin for a full grip. He tried holding it gently with only three fingers, as he saw others doing it, but it felt flimsy and awkward. *Should I hold it like a pencil? Or a spoon?* He shifted his fingers about, but neither hold was the right one for him.

Rose and Lucy were engrossed in deep concentration. Eric watched them practice, but didn't want to interrupt. *They sure picked it up quickly.* Gemma twirled around, and some of the other younger children were playing instead of practicing.

"Hey, you two! Stop bashing each other on the head! Those are high-quality training staves; if you break them, I'll chew you up and spit you out!"

"Yes, ma'm."

Eric pondered what his problem was. He didn't like wands, but didn't think his dislike was so deep it would to turn into disgust. Also, the idea of quitting before even starting was repulsive to him. *Even if I'm biased, it's better to give an honest try before deciding for sure.*

Did I quit after destroying three crystals? Of course not, I'm not a quitter. He managed to charge the crystal on the fourth try. He stood with the crystal in hand for what felt like half an hour, waiting for it to absorb the energy it needed. *Those things are half-alive or something.* He didn't actually have to do much except be patient and make sure not to unintentionally overload the crystal. *It wasn't as bright as Lucy's, but I didn't quit then and I won't quit now.*

The sky thundered, without a single cloud in sight. *Strange.* Ever since the first time he arrived in dream camp, he couldn't recall it ever rained.

He looked at the wand in his hand, and resisted an urge to throw it away and be done. He recalled how it felt to hold Dancing Feather in his hand - such power, such purpose!

Eric sighed, and walked towards the stone table with the piles of stuff on it. Maeve was overseeing the kids from there.

"Could I try a staff instead?" Eric asked.

"Sure. Is there something wrong with the wand?"

"No, I just don't like it much."

"I see..." Maeve pulled out a black staff from the pile, and knocked on it. "Try this one."

"Thank you."

Eric took the staff and started walking back. The staff wasn't flimsy as the wand, and holding it felt more natural. Yet, his reluctance lingered on. The staff had substance, but in Eric's mind, it still lacked purpose.

He stopped after a few steps. *Maybe I don't have to figure out everything on my own.*

Eric turned back to Maeve. "I guess I just don't get it; why should I use a wand or a staff at all?"

"As I said before, wands provide a baseline for magical energies. Your own energies are channeled into the wood, where any surges and inconsistencies are smoothed over. When focus magic is used together with symbol and ritual magic, the results tend to be consistent and nasty surprises are kept to a minimum. With practice, it becomes easier to focus on the particular energy type that you want to use. It's the same thing with staves, except they handle more power at the expense of precision."

The sky thundered again. Eric looked up, and saw dark clouds approaching.

Maeve grumbled under her breath. "I thought we agreed not to implement a weather cycle just yet... Damn that Joe, what the hell is he up to now?"

"Ohlson said a sword can do everything a wand can, is that true?" Eric asked.

"He exaggerated. Blades as focus items are carriers of the edge - that which severs and connects things. Wands and staves are good for manipulating the quality of energy, whereas with blades the energy type doesn't matter much as long as it's sharply controlled."

"But why should I use a wand if I can cast a spell without it?"

"Perhaps the biggest reason is ease of use. A wand helps iron out the mage's energies, so she has an easier time focusing - hence the term 'focus item'. This ties in well with the use of habit in ritual magic."

"But isn't that only a kind of crutch?"

Maeve shrugged. "A tool is a tool. It doesn't mean you have to use it all the time, just that you *can* use it if you want to. Another big reason is that focus items can be enhanced to help the user in various ways, most commonly through embedding crystals or carving runes. A skilled wandsmith can also create wands for specialized purposes." Maeve picked up a wand from the pile and waved it around.

"Lastly, a focus item can be used for practice while you learn a new spell or improve an old one. With the help of a wand, you can approach your own energies more objectively, and learn greater control. Some mages even go to the length of constructing various focus apparatuses to help them train. Alchemists create similar contraptions to aid them with their work."

Maeve lowered the wand. "Today's class is only about familiarizing yourself with focus items. Just observe and feel how the energy changes through the focus item; even if you won't use such tools in the future, you will have still learned something."

Eric caught himself leaning too much on the staff; he straightened up and nodded. "That makes sense. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

He turned around and walked back to his training spot. He wasn't enamored with focus items, but at least he came to understand how they could be useful. Eric decided to use a staff for training, but not carry one around. *For now*.

"Why aren't you training?" Rose asked, offering no more than a glance.

Rose and Lucy stood farther away, and they continued to concentrate deeply as they whirled their wands. Eric couldn't tell if they were making progress or not, but they certainly showed dedication.

"I am, I just had some questions," he said loudly, and waited a moment for Rose to respond. She didn't, and he turned his attention back to the staff.

The wood was dark and hardened. *Must be some kind of coating.* It had the same symmetric arrangement of small, black crystals as the wand, except they were greater in number due to the length and thickness of the staff.

Since he couldn't use his standard fireball stance with the staff in his hands, he held it in his right hand, extended it, and pointed it in a direction away from everyone. He tried

to make a fireball as he was accustomed to, but he broke off the spell almost immediately. *Damn.*

When he used only his hands, there was a degree of immediacy, a certain tactile feedback which was missing here. *Maybe I'm just not used to it yet.* Additionally, the point he's supposed to focus on, the far end of the staff, was... well... far. Pushing the energy through the staff wasn't difficult, but it presented an additional layer of complexity requiring attention.

Eric tried again. Making the energy surge through the staff was more difficult than simply externalizing the fire.

There was a faint burning smell, and for a brief moment, a black shine grew from the crystals and enveloped the staff. The burning smell promptly subsided.

I should stop trying to make the fireball right away and just focus on pressing the energy through.

The staff definitely put up resistance to the energy passing through it. Eric considered pushing harder, but concluded it would probably defeat the purpose of using a staff. *Maybe the principle that the wielder has to become one with the weapon holds true here as well.*

So far, since the fire attunement, the externalization of fire energy was as simple as flicking a switch. He recognized the fire within and pushed it out, easy as that. The resistance of the staff interfered and made him pay attention to the process - he had to go from inside energy to partial externalization to outside energy.

His identity stretched. That which travelled through the staff was still part of him, until it became something recognizably outside of himself. *Is this extra step a benefit or hindrance?* Eric started thinking about how to use it to his advantage.

The fire energy he pushed through the staff came out different than his usual explosive fire. Instead of big flames intent on burning everything, the resulting fire consisted of small flames burning with the same size and color.

Controllable? He pushed the fire through, and made a standard air sphere for containment at the exit point. The result was a mono-color flame ball, which was responsive to Eric's guidance, but didn't pack much of a punch. Eric went through the motions a few times, thinking about how to use this type of energy. He remembered what Ohlson told him, that advanced fireball spells also used earth-type containment.

He guided the energy along; reminiscent of the time Rose used a burning twig to illustrate the idea behind the magic of imagination. He led the fire along in the major motions of a magic sphere, and after a few tries, it remained relatively stable.

Practice this way was tedious, since he didn't have the stance or the use of his hands to help him, but he was getting the hang of it.

Slowly, a plan formed in his mind. If he used this cleaner type of energy to make a shape on the inside, and applied the rotations of an air-based sphere from the outside, this two-tiered containment would allow him to push more fire into the spell. But how could he access the regular fire if he pushed it all through the staff? *I would have to learn to get this energy without the staff.*

Or... oh, I'm a genius! I could push energy both through the staff and around it! The fire passing through the staff would be clearer, while the fire travelling around it would be unfiltered and he could externalize the bulk of it without resistance.

He let the idea of the spell crystallize in his mind, until each detail fell into place.

It should work... It will work!

Eric extended the staff away from him, paused for a moment in deliberation, and let the spell fly. Flames blazed along the staff, and a powerful turbulence whipped them into shape at the end of the staff. It wasn't yet a fireball, but it was fire, and it was a ball, more or less, violently spiraling around in many directions. Eric's concentration skipped out on one detail, then another - and the flames burst out in a display of fireworks.

Yes! I'll have to work on the compression... but it works!

"Did you see what I just did?"

Rose smiled briefly and gave him a quiet thumbs-up.

"I used two-fold containment. It's not yet perfect, but maybe next I will..."

"Shh." Rose was more interested in what was going on to her left, as she was eavesdropping on the conversation between Lucy and Maeve.

Eric moved closer.

"...can play as long as they don't disturb others who are practicing. Keep an eye on the item piles, and if someone wants to leave, collect their practice wands. Got it?"

"Yes," Lucy said.

"Good... I'll be back soon. I feel it in my bones, Joe's up to something and he didn't tell me. And if he is, I'll beat the ever-loving poop out of him. I have too much to worry about as it is."

Chapter 13 - Nightmare Combat

With every ounce of resistance you're making your fear stronger. Every such thought or feeling is like saying: "This thing is so strong and I am so weak!" Why would you give your power and integrity away like that? Face your fear head on, accept it, let it go and see it vanish.

- Practical Guide to Nightmares,
Dreamer's Handbook

Eric was sitting on top of a hill, twiddling a blade of grass and listening to Mr. Smith.

"...so, try not to do anything that would seem cowardly or too otherworldly. Here are some guidelines: engage head on, at short or mid distance. No long-range sniping, alright? No excessive flying either - a hop or two is allowed, but keep the battle on the ground. No mind control, no illusions, no hexes, no curses, no domination magic, no necromancy-"

"We don't know any of those," Lucy said.

"Good... nothing too dark or too cruel. Charge and bash their skulls in, or blast them from not too far. No sneaking, no backstabbing, no eye-gouging. Kicks in the groin area are just fine - dirty, but not dishonorable. We want them defeated, but it should be very clear to them that they are being defeated at their own game in a friendly contest. Questions?"

"Why are they attacking us?" Rose asked.

"They have a battle culture; probably no reason beyond that. For them, a battle is how they validate and find their own place in the world. For us, this battle is a communication attempt. By making a show of force, we are saying we are not pushovers and that we share some of their values. If we exhibit too little force, they'll despise us. If we exhibit too much, we risk being revered. So, we aim for the middle and hope to establish a basis for future diplomacy."

Mr. Smith raised a pointed finger. "That's where you come in. We, the teachers in this camp, are too powerful, so we'll let you kids take the front lines. The fight will be fairer, and the goblins will have to acknowledge the ferocity of young humans. It should be a learning experience for you as well."

"And what will you do?" Rose asked.

"Observe, mostly, and prepare for the unexpected. I'll keep the portal and the realm stable, make sure no one scares to death, and take other precautions you don't have to concern yourself with."

A vast field stretched below, filled with the shush of green grass. Across the field and a little to Eric's left, towered a hill higher than the one he was sitting on. To his distant right, densely packed trees marked the boundary of the field. Beyond the trees, all he could see was a large body of water going till the horizon. *Is that a sea? Hmm... I think not. It might be the same lake I swam in, just in another configuration.*

On the far edge of the field was the reason they were here: the portal. It still looked strange, but it was no longer simply an anomaly in the space-time continuum. It was strong, more symmetrical, its movements and rotations no longer haphazard. It twisted light around it like a kaleidoscope, but it also radiated: the light of another sun was shining through it.

"Wasn't the portal on top of the cliff?" Eric asked.

"We moved it. We needed space and static distances, so we constructed this battlefield for the occasion."

"I didn't know it was possible to move a portal," Lucy said.

"Everything is possible," Mr. Smith stated.

There was movement near the portal. A figure appeared, ran around quickly with a raised sword, and shouted loud enough even for Eric to hear it. One more goblin appeared, then another and another... They quickly formed a defensive circle around the portal.

One figure seemed taller than the rest. *No... he's short and hunched just like the others, but carrying a staff. It must be a shaman.* More of them were appearing fast, kind of just slipping out of the portal.

So, that's how a goblin invasion begins. Even though he knew a battle was forthcoming, Eric felt remarkably tranquil. Looking down from the hill, the conflict seemed distant in time as well as space.

The goblins were already too numerous to count. Loud too; their yelling and growling added a constant hum to the background noise. The air carried a different scent, and the grass near the portal seemed to grow darker. *Maybe I'm just imagining it.*

Upon recognizing other, more familiar sounds as well, Eric looked to the left. Groups of children were coming in from the Playground, clamoring and battle-ready. Eric took a deep breath to absorb all the anticipation around him.

"It's time. Let's go, we'll find you some equipment."

* * *

For a long moment, Eric stared at the goblin warrior charging at him.

They locked eyes, and the shape of the goblin's ugly grimace mirrored into Eric's stomach; constricting it and making it nauseous.

Eric did not simply freeze, in the way fear and indecision are known to affect a person. The fear punched a hole in his abdomen, taking away not only Eric's nauseous feeling, but also many of his thoughts that were telling him to be afraid.

Eric's thinking ceased and his mind went blank - the implosion of fear turned into an explosion of perception. It was a strange kind of moment, where he could sense everything going on around him.

Everyone, all screams and clashes, were interlocked in the greater pattern of the battle.

The goblin warriors were short and stocky, dealing wounds more proficiently than their opponents. The kids were nimbler, dodging and ducking, outswarming the goblins and putting them off-balance.

There was Ohlson, overseeing the youngest fighters and attacking surgically with Dancing Feather. There were Kyle and Lyle and Duke, biting and yelling, running through enemy lines and casting unstable magics. There was Lucy, and Rose in another spot, fighting alone and pushing the frontline deeper.

Eric's eyes were still on the goblin, and if he had his full mental faculties, he would have found it interesting how the goblin's grimace changed in slow motion.

This state, being so much in the moment to be absent from it, was not without limitations - Eric's trance was slowly fading.

The goblin appeared to be suspended mid-charge and couldn't have changed its path even if it wanted to. It was clear to Eric where the goblin's steps would land and when its crude sword would come down.

The moment was gone. Eric sidestepped, avoided the slash, and whacked the goblin just above the neck.

Eric felt the bone break and the skull crush under the hilt of his sword. He noticed the goblin's battle yell only when it turned into a cry of pain. The goblin's body turned into crimson smoke, leaving behind a smell of blood and perspiration.

Eric raised his sword as part of an impromptu victory dance.

"I did it! I did it! I di-"

The next thing he felt was his own skull being bashed in; shattered bits and bone pieces splashing not only his brain out but also his sense of self. There was no time for pain.

* * *

"I see her!" Eric yelled.

After reappearing in a grove behind the hill, Eric thought it would be best if he stopped the heroics and sought out Rose and Lucy.

"Where?" Rose yelled back.

Eric found Rose quickly. He noticed a large empty space in the middle of the densely packed battle, marked by flying and falling goblins. Rose stood in its center, flinging airballs.

With many goblins around, she would let an airball grow bigger and more volatile. It would knock back and disorient a group of goblins, so others could step in and finish them off. When she needed precision, she would keep the spell more tightly together, so it would lift up and blast away a single goblin.

She's too reckless, Eric thought when he first saw her fight. *She's wielding that flimsy wand well, but she's isolating herself by pushing too deep into enemy territory.*

Eric did not deem it necessary to share this observation, but judging by how easy it was to persuade Rose to regroup, she must have come to a similar conclusion too.

"Over there!" Eric yelled.

The two of them were running towards Lucy, hopping sideways at times to avoid a friendly spell or a carelessly charging kid, and occasionally dispatching a daring goblin.

Every so often Eric rubbed the back of his head, subconsciously making sure the memory remained only a memory. *I have to be more careful.* Each time the nerves in his hand reported a sensation of an uninjured familiar head, Eric exhaled in relief.

It was easier to catch sight of Lucy as they managed to come closer. She was waving her staff without pause: shards of earth rose up one after the other, flew out, and hit their targets. Some goblins got knocked down and remained there, others turned into purplish mist and disappeared.

Eric could see a larger contingent of goblin reinforcements closing in on Lucy's location. They used their swords and shields to deflect her projectiles - with variable success.

"Hurry, she needs help!" Eric shouted.

"I'm right behind you!"

Getting killed by an assailant he could barely see sapped Eric's confidence, but having Rose at his side and the prospect of joining Lucy reassured him. *We'll finally fight as a team!*

Also, having his skull smashed in before, he knew what to expect from the worst case scenario, and it wasn't as terrifying as before. *Moments of death are not as bad as the stress of fearing the unknown.*

Eric was starting to enjoy the battle and treat it more as a game - that's what the goblins were doing, in their crude and grunting way. *They revel in it.*

As much as he loved swords, sticking to mid-range fireballing seemed more prudent than engaging in melee. *Better not risk a trip back from the grove.*

The goblin group nearly reached Lucy, and seeing there were too many for her to take on alone, she erected an earthen barrier in front of her. The goblins charged.

Eric kept running. He threw a fireball at a lone goblin in his way, and was considering what course of action to take. The fireball hit, and the goblin evaporated along with the flames.

"Cover me!" Eric shouted to Rose.

The first goblin reached Lucy's shield and gave it a big whack - the shield held.

More goblins arrived and started hammering. A few of them went around, trying to get to Lucy where the barrier was not yet up. Rose's airball made one of them involuntarily airborne, while another got smitten by Lucy's staff.

Lucy managed to complete the shield, which covered her like an earthen bubble and hid her from view. Parts of the shield cracked under the goblins' assault, but Lucy reinforced the damaged parts as soon as she could.

Rose kept hurling airballs, some missing completely, and some serving only as a distraction. "What the hell are you doing?!" She shouted to Eric.

"I'll take care of them, just hold a little longer!"

Eric formed a fireball in his hand, trying to make the improved version he practiced before. He had no staff this time, but he knew what to concentrate on. *Keep the clean energy separate. Rotate, push more fire and keep it stable.*

Instead of throwing the fireball, Eric rushed ahead while holding it in his hand. *I can't afford to miss!*

"Lucy, strengthen the top!" He barked, unsure if she would hear.

Eric launched into the air, avoiding half a dozen enraged goblins and aiming to come down on top of the protective bubble.

He loosened the rotations and pushed more fire into the ball, which exploded as soon as it made contact with the shield. The blast traveled along the edge of the shield, catching the goblins in the face.

The fire disintegrated all surrounding goblins, except one who just lay there groaning. Lucy walked to the goblin, and slammed down with her staff. This goblin puffed away too; a breeze carrying away the reddish smoke along with the earthy remains of the shield.

The blast didn't burn Eric much - it was his fire after all - but inhaling the heated air hurt. Crashing down through Lucy's shield and twisting an arm in the fall hurt even more.

"Come on!"

Lucy grabbed Eric's other arm and started dragging him back. He stumbled after her while Rose covered their retreat.

Upon reaching friendlier territory, they stopped and slumped to the ground. All of them were breathing heavily. Eric was singed - his face charred and his hairstyle peculiar.

"What a suicidal rescue," Lucy remarked with weary smile.

Rose drew Lucy close in a hug and planted a kiss on her cheek. "You're the suicidal one."

"What about me?" Eric asked.

"You are too," Rose said.

"No, don't I get-"

"Blehh," Rose pinched her nose and leaned away. "You smell like a burnt pig; I'm not going anywhere near you."

Eric slanted his lips. "Raincheck, then?"

"Maybe."

Eric closed his eyes. A battlefield wasn't the best place to rest, but even a moment's respite was welcome. *Breathe in... breathe out... breathe in... breathe out...* He felt the ache in his arm, throbbing with pain to the rhythm of his heartbeat. He tried to put the pain out of his mind, and for a moment, just BE...

Suddenly, Lucy jumped to her feet. "Incoming!"

Chapter 14 - Healing

Before there was light, there was touch.

Mages prefer sight; but touch is close and sight is distant. A healer has to know when to turn one into the other.

- Sense and Comprehension,
Dreamer's Handbook

Healing magic is in a unique position among the magical disciplines, as it has an additional, broader objective: to unify all the magical disciplines.

Skilled shamans, elementalists, symbol-weavers and other mages who insist on maintaining their human identities access the depths through compartmentalization and rely on selective knowledge as well as trained intuition to stay reasonably balanced. Healers operating at those depths do not have such luxury: they do not derive their skills from what they know, but from who they are.

- Magic Beyond Magic,
Dreamer's Handbook

"Pull the dagger out."

Rose shook her head. "I'd rather not. What if I mess up?"

Maeve turned to Eric. "You do it then." Maeve's hand rested on the patient's chest, almost touching the dagger that was lodged firmly in the boy's ribcage.

Eric gulped.

The wounded boy was floating above the ground, resting on nothing but thin air. His body convulsed now and then, following the rhythm of his quiet sobs.

"I... I don't think I can do it," Eric said.

A faint frown ran through Maeve's face.

"May I?" Lucy asked.

Maeve nodded. She withdrew her hand and stepped back. "Go ahead."

"Do I just yank it out?"

"Yes, just pull straight up."

Lucy approached and placed both hands on the hilt of the dagger. She took several deep breaths.

The dagger was of the same crude workmanship Eric saw goblins carry and use in battle. Uneven, possibly rusted blade, with a dirty and deformed handle. He could almost smell the unwashed odor.

"Go ahead," Maeve repeated, encouraging.

Lucy flexed her fingers, tightened her grip on the dagger as much as she could, and gave it a big yank. The dagger dislodged and shot out effortlessly under her guiding hands.

Lucy smiled in relief, but her smile turned into bewilderment as she watched the dagger turn into mist and reappear lodged deeply in the boy's chest.

"What... how-" Lucy muttered.

When the boy noticed the removed dagger reappear in his chest, his distant and resigned sobbing turned into manic crying. "Get it out! Get it out of me! Get it out! Get-" His body rocked violently back and forth as he tried to get up.

Lucy backpedaled.

Maeve acted swiftly: she moved in and placed one hand on the boy's brow. "That's right, just go to sleep." The wailing and the body-jerks stopped. With her other hand she yanked out the dagger and tossed it away in one swift motion - it didn't reappear.

Caressing, she drew her hand across the bloodied wound. The blood went away, and the t-shirt no longer showed tearing; Eric presumed the wound healed as well.

"There... No need to make a fuss. Just rest," Maeve said to the sleeping, floating boy. She drew one hand across his hair, and made an intricate hand gesture with the other. The boy vanished - not in reddish smoke, as defeated combatants did, but with the stretching, perspective-changing motions of a teleportation spell. Eric silently congratulated himself for spotting the difference.

"Fear of death and nightmarish clinging to life often produce a deformed ego-image. With time he would get rid of the blade on his own, but not before going through a valley of shadows of his own creation. Such a complex problem for a simple solution..."

* * *

After battling the goblin warriors, Eric expected the battlefield to be littered with dead bodies.

"The first three levels of healing are very similar, and they are, in order: prevention, patience, and preparation."

"Prevention is about not getting into a situation that would require healing in the first place. Avoid the speeding car and you won't get hit by it - easy, right?"

Eric understood early on in his life the difference between movie violence and real-life violence.

He remembered being whisked away from the site of an accident several years ago. Although he didn't see much, the image of the crushed car remained with him, and the concerned, frightened looks on the adults' faces made a lasting impression.

What he didn't get is why adults seemed to shelter themselves even from the idea of violence, only to revere it from a distance. *Mortality and fear and pressures and thresholds...* Eric caressed the back of his head. *I should've paid more attention to war documentaries on tv.*

"Time does not heal all wounds, but when time can heal a wound, patience helps you get there."

"Healing through preparation is mostly about making sure you give your body and subconscious the space it needs to restore itself - be it physical, emotional, mental, or any other kind of space. Rest, sleep, cut back on regular activities, and actively do nothing."

Instead of corpses, broken-off weapon and armor pieces lay littered on trampled grass. There were no dead bodies, but there were casualties: sometimes instead of reappearing at the glade, the wounded remained on the battlefield, lying in shock and pain. Dream violence was more emotional than tv violence, but its results less permanent than real-life violence.

"Next in depth is a trifecta of reinforcements: external, mental, and emotional. Healer-specialists operate at these depths."

"Doctors excel at external reinforcement - give a pill, excise a tumor, place a bandage - but they mostly focus on the dis-ease instead of the patient."

Eric, Lucy, and Rose kept up with Maeve's steady pace, walking across the battlefield to help the wounded. Most of them needed only reassurance that everything is going to be all right. Others just needed rest after the exhausting battle. Of course, there were exceptions, like the boy with the dagger in his chest.

"Mental reinforcement involves clarifying the mind, improving mind-body feedback, integrating the conscious and subconscious closer together, and so on... Psychologists seek to carve out logic from these depths."

"The goal of emotional reinforcement is to bring forth happiness and spiritual fulfillment. Choiceful action is preferable over unwilled reaction, but there has to be balance between being ruled by emotions and suppressing them with frigid discipline. For emotional reinforcement, there is rarely a better healer than a trusted friend."

There was also the girl with the wide gash on her upper leg - Eric didn't think he ever saw a person bleed so profusely. *Right out of a horror movie.* Maeve said she had control issues. They helped bandage the wound - it was weird with all the blood gushing around Eric's fingers - but it stopped soon afterwards and the wound healed fast.

"Going even deeper, we step into the domain of values, codes and attitudes - those things that knowingly or not, shape the core of a personality. There are no healer-specialists at this level, since it's no longer about fixing a broken part, but about deciding which 'whole' to realize. Symbolists occasionally dip down here to find and form archetypes."

And of course! There was also the kid with the severed arm. He walked calmly up to Maeve, carrying his severed arm in his other hand. In his head, Eric knew this was supposed to be scary and worrying, but after all that blood, the situation seemed morbidly funny rather than serious. *Must be a mild shock.* That boy healed quickly too - the three of them held the arm in place until it got reattached. There remained no marks of the injury and the boy regained full movement in his arm and fingers.

"Language becomes increasingly useless as we go deeper."

Then there was the berserker kid who chased others with an ax in his hand and a senseless glare on his face. Maeve handled this one on her own: she 'ported after the kid, touched him lightly on the shoulder, and made him collapse immediately. *These things happen, Maeve said.*

"We can talk about identity boundaries, identity contexts, core patterns and core integrals, but the dissonance between experience and verbal thought grows wider. The pressures of the collective subconscious become more obvious, and memetic motions more pronounced."

The goblins had casualties too, and they carried away their own. In few occasions, Eric thought he saw Mr. Smith finish off or heal goblins. *I'm not sure which, maybe both.*

Eric listened to Maeve's droning with only half his mind. They walked across the field at a leisurely pace, looking if they missed anyone still needing help. Maeve used this time to expound on the basic theories of healing magic.

"Going even deeper with a relatively fixed perception of self-individuality triggers the Hall of Mirrors experience. Horrid things can happen; it's not that you can get lost, but that it's so easy to lose yourself. If you become an NPC, you'll have to wait for someone to stare into the abyss so you can look back. There are generally two ways out from the Hall of Mirrors: escape back any way you can and forget you were ever there, or go through."

In Eric's experience, all teachers had the tendency to talk on and on about topics they liked and understood, and often forgot they were supposed to be talking to someone other than themselves. Even if they caught themselves going off tangents, many of them wouldn't - or couldn't - change course. *They don't get that the mindset of learning is different from the mindset of having learned.* Some teachers were plain incompetent: *How does one learn about history by memorizing dates?*

"I can't tell you much about going through; this 'me' that's talking to you doesn't know. Your individuality shatters, the anthropomorphism of your identity dissolves, maybe even taking with it whatever context the elementality of the realm offered you."

The teachers in Dream Camp were nowhere near as bad, but Eric felt they tended to talk over their students' heads - like Maeve did now. What Eric wasn't sure about is if they were doing it on purpose. He could feel the pressure of her words, prodding at his mind.

Sometimes, when he tried too hard to understand something, he would understand some small part and skip out on all the rest. Of course, when he didn't try at all, he understood nothing.

But, somewhere in between, when he didn't try too hard to control his own mind, he wouldn't get much of it at first, but after sleeping on it and thinking about related stuff, it was easier for all to just 'click'. *Like, if I just let it, my mind does most of the thinking for me, and I can just pick off the ripe fruit from the low-hanging branch.*

He hoped this was one of those times - he just let his thoughts loose and hoped all that complex theory would make sense later.

"Mystics say it's all a big circle; massive regeneration, rebirthing or ressurrective capabilities are the boons of master healers and archmages - they are experts of what we call 'doing nothing'."

"They also say a society is advanced only if the collective subconscious is purified and reintegrated with the individual. Humanity has much shit to clean up, and most of it will fall on you..."

Like now, when he followed the trail of his own attention: some words he understood, some he disregarded, others came together and formed strings of light in his mind. He recognized thoughts and ideas behind some of the words, and could put them into words

of his own, while with other thoughts and ideas it was like he could see their glowing shapes, even if he couldn't re-assemble them into words.

When he looked at the world this way, it wasn't only words that became light... Everything seemed to have light glowing around and above - himself included.

His own light he felt more than saw: wings of light, supporting him and lifting his spirits. These wings didn't help him fly - he already knew how to do that - but helped him assert his presence. *I am here. This is my domain.*

Eric felt powerful.

When he observed closely, he saw the light wasn't just above things; it *was* the things. When he looked farther within, he saw his thoughts, emotions, and features of his humanness he took for granted - fly into and away from him as rays of light.

Don't go, he vocalized the thought with concern, only to watch it shine away as a single ray of light.

He became scared. *Where's my fear?* All he could see was light; shiny rays bouncing and reflecting off of... *What?* Other light? He located the jumble of confused light that was his fear. *I may not like you, but you're mine!* He tried to pull his fear back into him. *Pull into what?*

With big parts of him visible outside, he dared not look in the inner direction he felt the remainder of himself was, lest that too would turn into light. *Nothing would remain... no one to observe.*

"Anybody there? Snap out of it!"

A shattering sound in front of his eyes broke his vision. *A clap.* Eric opened his eyes, only to realize they were already open. He saw a hand waving in front of his face - it was Rose's.

"Are you all right? You haven't said anything for some time."

Eric cleared his throat. "I'm fine. Just daydreaming, I guess."

"Daydreaming? Again? You do that a lot." Lucy turned to Maeve. "How does it work anyway? Dreaming in a dream, I mean?"

Maeve shrugged. "Depends. Can be iterative, recursive, coincidental... like a fractal or kaleidoscope, with varying levels of overlay. Awareness being fixed to an ego-consciousness is the exception rather than the rule."

"But, can you like, dream in a dream in a dream in a dream, and so on?"

"Sure, you could say such movement forms the basis of any reality. In practice, if you operate based from an anchor reality, that which is 'real life' for us, there are dangers and difficulties associated with going too far. Not all identities and ego-structures can handle the pressure, especially if untrained."

Maeve paused. "Or, looking at it another way, none can, and death is inevitable. You could say death is a way of life."

Lucy digested the words in silence.

"Come, let's go back to the others. I'll have a few words with Joe, and you should prepare for the second wave of attacks."

Eric walked on with the others, enjoying the inner and outer silence, paying attention only to the renewed trampling of grass.

Chapter 15 - Demonology

Hunger for power is the most common reason for meddling with powerful forces. However, there are those who, either through curiosity or the push-and-pull of social forces, end up staring into the sun too long. The lucky ones get burned out, corrupted or possessed. The unlucky ones become religious fanatics. When looking into the abyss or the sun, use an adequate protective filter: a strong ego.

- Misuse of Force, Dreamer's Handbook

Eric sidestepped the fireball. It was poorly aimed, but the goblin shaman's tiptoeing annoyed him to no end. *I'll wipe that toothless grin off your ugly mug.*

This shaman wasn't as fierce as the goblin warriors were. No tenacity, no enjoyment of the battle. He just hobbled about, acting all smug, occasionally casting a flimsy fireball to provoke Eric.

He deserves no respect from me. Eric was tempted to cover the distance between them with a sprint, and snap his neck. No spells, no blades - just to feel the neck bone of this puny creature crack in his hands. *He wouldn't be able to stop me, not in time.*

"Just a little more!"

The shaman had one reason - and one reason only - for acting smug: the massive demon he never ventured far from.

While Eric kept an eye on the shaman, Lucy and Rose were engaging the demon. They had a plan: first, Rose used an air containment spell. It looked like a large magic sphere around the demon, restricting some of its movements. Second came Lucy's water chains, their watery essence pressing into the spirit-body of the demon.

The demon wasn't a true demon in the hellfire-and-brimstone kind of way - it was a bear spirit, large and strong. It could have been even noble in its true shape, but its current form was leaking energy, and it raged with fiery madness at its surroundings as well as its own incompleteness.

It's torture, Eric realized. *The goblin shaman is forcing an unnatural form on a semi-conscious force.* Eric felt a little sorry for the bear-demon and despised the shaman even more. He wondered whether the shaman was intentionally malicious... *Just petty and incompetent,* Eric decided.

He saw other such demons on the battlefield, though none as big as this one. *Was it a cultural thing? Torturing to compensate for size?*

"Now, Eric!"

He recalled Lucy's explanation about how her water-chains worked; something about dispel magic and elemental neutralization. It wasn't very intuitive, but his role was clear: to fight fire with fire.

If timed right, a well-placed fireball would add more force and break the shaman's control. If timed wrong, the demon would assimilate his fire and become more powerful. Lucy and Rose's containment spells would break and they would have to start all over again.

Eric spent a few seconds concentrating on building up his fireball. Where to aim? The head? The torso? The fiery limbs trying to lash out? Aiming for center mass seemed best. *Now, just to find the right moment...*

As he deliberated, his eyes registered movement from above. He lifted his head to look.

"Crows!" Eric yelled.

I look away for a moment and that's what I get. His fireball wasn't very good against a swarm of small targets, and he was strongly tempted to feed it to the shaman instead.

"They're mine!" Rose yelled back.

Rose's containment spell temporarily weakened as she dispatched a loose airball towards the pack of crows. The demon had a bit more freedom to rattle and steam the chains, but they did not break.

Eric concentrated on packing more power into the fireball. He glanced at one of the crows which fell nearby. *Half-dead; a zombie bird.* When the searing-steaming rattling subsided and Rose reassumed control... *Now's the time!* Eric let go and drove the fireball into the demon's center.

The demon grew in size. One by one, Lucy's water-chains snapped, and evaporated. The rotations of Rose's containment spell ground to a halt and vanished.

I timed it wrong...

Rose and Lucy hopped back, preparing for the demon's attack. Eric took a few steps back, and briefly looked at the goblin shaman - he wasn't acting smug anymore.

The bear-demon kept growing fast, and with a final roar, exploded. Chunks of the demon's spirit-energy flew everywhere.

...Or not.

Eric noticed he was holding back his breath, and exhaled. Relaxing his tense muscles, he allowed himself a smile.

What he didn't notice was a big chunk of the bear-demon's energy falling down from above and hitting him squarely in the head.

The moment of surprise was followed by a feeling not unlike being hit by a fireball. It was unpleasant, but Eric was somewhat used to it by now. The strangest part came a few seconds later: the fiery energy, instead of blasting away against his flesh, went through him.

It was like the flames at the attunement, but... different. Some of the energy was from his fireball, returning to him, but most of it was the bear-demon's own. It brought fleeting glimpses of understanding - of sadness, of being out of place, of being imprisoned and finally free. These glimpses perished fast, leaving behind only anger and power. Lots of anger and lots of power. To Eric, it was like a hunger he never experienced before.

Eric looked at his hands. He had a crimson tan. His experience of the power was a kind of shortening between will and desire: *Whatever I want, I can. Directly. Now.*

His anger directed towards the goblin shaman, who was stumbling backwards and making the gestures of a spell with his hands. *I'll just crush him.*

Silky-silvery energy threaded out of the goblin shaman's hands, and formed into three large wolves. There was elegance and speed to their movements, much in contrast with the shaman's own. *Ahh, there's at least something you're good at!*

"Leave these to me!" Eric roared, and ran ahead to make sure the wolves target him.

The spirit-wolves danced around him, circling, barking and biting the air in front of them with such speed that they reminded Eric of depictions of three-headed hellhounds.

Despite their obvious violent nature and menacing growls, these spirit-creatures were unlike the demonic bear and the zombie crows. Their shapes were strong and natural to them. The non-angry side of Eric could appreciate that, and even let off some of the disdain he felt towards the shaman.

The bigger, angrier side of Eric saw just one more obstacle to crush. He let his anger and fire concentrate in his right fist, until the top layer of his skin peeled off, and his fist looked like the inside of a nasty fireball. The wolves were fast, but not as fast as Eric: he clobbered them one by one. The wolves' silky energy burned away like cobweb.

Again, his attention turned towards the shaman, who was exhausted and cowering. Eric walked dauntingly towards him, but he was stopped by a wet hand grabbing his arm.

"Stay calm." Lucy pressed a bubble of milky substance onto Eric's burning fist.

The liquid acquiesced his anger, and Eric noticed after how much it soothed the burnt and partly bleeding skin on his arm.

After a few breaths, he was his old self again. "Thanks! I needed that."

"Sure. Who gets to finish off the shaman? We have a little time before he manages to flee."

They looked at each other. Lucy and Rose were eager too - after all, they did the bulk of the work.

"Rock-paper-scissors?" Rose asked.

* * *

Master Joe was walking slowly across the field.

Behind him, the army from the Playground was venting jubilant cries; waiting for either a victory celebration or a final push to drive out the intruders.

Ahead of him stood the goblin war council - the strongest warriors and the most experienced shamans. They faced a difficult choice: surrender and go back through the portal, or play whatever trump cards they had left.

"Popcorn?"

Eric took the large, cinema-style cup from Lucy. "Thanks! Where did you get these?"

"I don't reveal my sources."

While munching the popcorn, the three of them watched Master Joe's progress from atop of the hill. The view was clear and the air more vibrant than usual.

"Do you think there'll be a fight?"

"Nah, I don't think Master Joe will let it."

Master Joe stopped within shouting distance of the war council. The dozen or so bigshots all faced in his direction; so did their aides and apprentices standing behind them, as well as the guards protecting the flank. Except for the motionless golems in the vicinity of the portal, all eyes were on him.

Master Joe paused for dramatic effect and cleared his throat. Despite sitting on a faraway hill and chomping down food, Eric could hear the sound as if the sky had built-in loudspeakers.

The sound startled one of the aides, who made a fireball and aimed it at Master Joe. It missed, but not by much.

Master Joe shifted his gaze to the spot of scorched grass where the fireball hit... and then at the shaman whose aide cast the spell.

The councilmembers stood transfixed for a few seconds, but then they too stared intently at that particular head shaman, who lifted his staff and whacked the aide so hard he fell to his knees.

Master Joe walked two steps closer and cleared his throat again.

"I am known as 'Joe' and this realm is my responsibility," his voice boomed. "Who speaks for the illustrious war council?"

One of the goblins stepped forward. He was less hunched and wore fewer trinkets on his body than the other shamans.

"I am Gorak, spokesman and current leader of the alliance of twelve tribes." Gorak spoke with the throaty, croaking sounds of his language, but Eric understood perfectly, even if the nuances of some of the words were different.

"To what do we owe the honor and displeasure of your attack?"

"Honor?" He spat. "There's no honor in what you humans do. You destroy and defile! Your violent and arrogant apathy corrupts everything around you. You turn into excrement whatever you touch! So shortsighted..." His nostrils flared as he spoke. "If you at least had the good measure to keep your shit to yourselves... but no, you have to poison everything! You don't even fight your nightmares; you cultivate them! The sewage of your dreams invades our realms and you ask why we fight?!"

Gorak lowered his arms. Dark-green patches appeared on the side of his face and the outburst left him short of breath.

"The bravery and veracity of goblin warriors is unquestionable, as is the intelligence of the mighty shaman who succeeded in opening this portal. Yet, do you hold the wisdom to distinguish between friend and foe? We are not your enemies. This is a realm where human children learn the self-discipline to battle nightmares. How would you react if someone attacked *your* young ones?"

"We can't let our tribes and realms be overrun by human hubris!" He exploded, and it took him several seconds to calm down enough to continue. He clawed on his staff with one finger. "...why should we trust you?"

"Do you see here any of the nightmares that encroach on your realms? Haven't our children proven to you their courage in battle? Our causes align. Reach out to tribes beyond the twelve; we have good relations with many of them. I am known among them as 'crazy old human'; listen to their words if you don't trust mine."

It's a name, not just a description. Interesting. It sounded something like *xernog*, and Eric was pretty sure the term was a slur for 'human', but not without a degree of respect.

The goblin was taken aback and silent. "I have heard of Sern Bog. I thought he lived only in our legends."

There was a murmur after Gorak stepped back to discuss with the other elders. They didn't deliberate long.

"If you are who you say you are - and based on the performance of your troops, we are inclined to believe you - you and your envoys will be welcomed as guests in our homes. We expect your visit to be soon. Until the time we had the chance to hear your advice, we shall suspend the activities of the war council. We leave now."

Master Joe nodded.

Eric watched as the goblins retreated. The handlers led the golems through the portal first, who were followed by the war council, and the warriors standing guard marched through last.

"That's it? Wasn't much of a spectacle. We still have leftover popcorn," Eric said. *I guess I hoped for a bit more action... but we had enough action for today.*

"I'm almost sad to see them leave," Rose said.

Chapter 16 - Symbol-Weaving

The obvious limitation of mathematics is the unquestioned axiom, but there is a hidden one as well: dogma. To define an axiom, we have to define what it means to define. If we don't, we fall into a continuous collapse of meta-mathematics, and to prevent that, we define 'to define' against our own consciousness that thinks about mathematical concepts. Thus, symmetry is broken and an axiom is established against the backdrop that is dogma.

We have to see mathematics for what it is: a human language doing its best to tame magic with form alone.

- Where Magic and Science Meet,
Dreamer's Handbook

The traditional method of linear definition and axiom enumeration lends itself well to doing calculations. Alternatively, we can create an axiom by plugging the problem parts into an equation (e.g. Euler's Identity) and proceeding with circular definitions from that point on. Symmetry-breaking using functional inequalities offers multiple handles for relation and theory management, and lends itself better to under- and overstanding the local axiom/dogma dynamic.

[Editor's comment: Interestingly, proctors of non-mathematical sciences use analogues of the latter approach, but rarely without a degree of stubborn ignorance; often claiming that the method they use is the one and true 'real' scientific method.]

- Where Magic and Science Meet,
Dreamer's Handbook

Kyle and Lyle were dragging a large sack.

"No! We don't need... help..." Kyle said, panting.

With the sun about to set, and after a long afternoon combing the field for litter left by goblins, Eric was glad the day was nearing its end. The goblins weren't an orderly bunch; rubbish was everywhere, smelling bad and sticky with sweat and dirt. *And who knows what other bodily excrements. Yuck.*

"Did you clear the entire tree line?" Mr. Smith asked.

"I think we... got everything," Kyle said.

The sack fell to the ground with a thud.

"Did you destroy all the wards?"

"We did. They pissed all over the trees," Lyle pinched his nose in disgust.

"Good job."

Kyle and Lyle sat down next to Mr. Smith. They were breathing heavily.

"Wards are like booby-traps, right? Isn't that dangerous?" Rose asked.

"There are many types of wards," Lucy said.

Mr. Smith raised an eyebrow. "You think I would use Kyle and Lyle as mine clearers? Those were just harmless alarm wards."

"What do you mean?"

"Some warlords send out children as human mine detectors; to step on mines so their own troops could safely pass."

Eric contemplated the implications. "Kids our age get sent to their deaths like that?"

"No, not your age. You would be more valuable as a soldier since you can hold a firearm. Younger children."

"But that's horrible! Goblins really do these kinds of things?" Rose asked.

"No. Humans do, back in the real world."

A feeling of wrongness pressed against Eric's mind and swirled in his stomach. *It makes no sense.* Adults sometimes called his generation spoiled and privileged - *I'm not spoiled, but it seems I might be privileged.*

Eric decided to push the feeling away. *It's too big for me. I'm a kid; I'll deal with it when I'm an adult.*

Kyle and Lyle were catching their breaths and paid no heed to the discussion.

"Tell him about the robot!" Lyle nudged his brother.

"Oh yea, we found a broken robot! It was too heavy for us to bring back with the rest of the garbage. Should we go back for it?"

"Are you strong enough to carry it?"

Lyle raised his arms to show off his muscles.

Kyle nodded. "Come," he said to Lyle and the two of them ran off.

"The problems of the world are heavy... You can't tackle it all at once." Mr. Smith drew the sack closer. He picked up a stick and poked around in it.

"If your bodies are exhausted but your minds are still fresh, I can teach you some basics of symbol-weaving. It could prove useful in the long run."

"Yes!" Lucy said.

Lucy... Eric sighed. *I hope it's not all talk.*

Mr. Smith examined several items from the sack: a wooden rod, an armor piece, a crude bracelet.

"Symbols are anchor points. We all operate with symbols, internally as well as externally. The benefit of using a symbol is that it gives awareness a somewhat fixed point to shift, focus on, and run circles around. It is a reflection through which understanding can be made clear."

He went through more items; a patched breastplate, the head of an axe, a broken sword.

They all had markings, reminding Eric of the many carvings found on classroom desks. *Goblins get bored too.*

"I hoped there would be something useful here, but... nothing."

Once Mr. Smith put everything back, the sack floated up into the air and turned into flames. The flames burned searing white, and the resulting ashes promptly phased out of existence. "The portal strained the realm enough, no need to compound the stress with these reality-remnants. The goblins brought over some of their flora too, but we'll leave that Maeve and her assistant."

Mr. Smith threw away the stick. "I'll explain more of the theory, then. Pay attention."

"Understanding is the inward motion of a net; rationalizing the world and slicing it with Ockham's razor. The constriction and expansion of relations, the normalization, the simplification, the grasping of essence and the pruning of the irrelevant to bring back a useful simulation - this is 'understanding'."

Eric chuckled. "I don't understand understanding."

"You jest, but the mind is wondrous... Anyway," Mr. Smith gesticulated rigidly with his arms as he talked.

"Overstanding is the outward motion of a net; charging out and projecting its reality into the world. It is the exclamation, the bursting of pipes, the change of simple into complex, the release of ratios and relations, the imprinting of existence upon the Void."

"What kind of net are you talking about? Like a fishing net?" Rose asked.

"A net is a semi-stable structure arising from the holographic principle, marked by the lines of broken symmetry. It is rudimentary self-awareness. Well, technically all awareness is self-awareness, but we reserve the term for the more shielded ego-structures with distinctive identities. In the case of humans, the net is the neural structure of the brain, anchoring and projecting the mind through a cloud of electromagnetic awareness."

A twitching facial muscle made a vein pop on Mr. Smith's face as he concentrated his thoughts into words and prepared to impart them.

"But, that's a topic for another day. What is important for us now is the direction of this motion: understanding moves the world inside and overstanding moves it outside."

"In the physical realm, the brain commands the limbs by sending electric impulses through the nerves, and overstanding occurs indirectly, in a higher order of abstraction - you imagine what you want, and achieve it through the use of your body. Overstanding directly requires fluidity of identity, and is rarely practiced by non-mages, but we all do it in the less heavy realms of dreams."

"Just as our bodies have heartbeats, so do our minds find the stability of existence in the pulsation between understanding and overstanding."

"Thus, we arrive at two of the most primal archetypes a symbol-weaver operates with:"

"That which only understands can only observe, and is called the Taker. That which only overstands can only act, and is called the Giver."

"These two archetypes form the philosophical basis of many religious beliefs as well as more practical approaches. Of course, these absolutes don't actually exist in separation, and you must cover all your base when constructing deities."

Eric noticed a hissing sound. Kyle and Lyle were pulling a large, metallic thing, and the sound came from the object sliding through the grass, occasionally hitting a small stone or a lump of earth.

"We got the robot!" Lyle yelled. He and Kyle brought the hunk of metal near the group and dropped it with a clank.

Mr. Smith grabbed the stick again and strategically poked the thing a few times. "Hmm, this might actually be useful..."

"Yay!" Kyle high-fived Lyle. "It was trying to climb a tree."

The thing was composed of metallic plates, with parts of it missing. It had a head, a torso, and one leg - but the arms and the other leg were gone. The undamaged parts had a metallic shine of orange and yellow. It still tried to move - without much success. A large, round symbol on its forehead emitted a faint blue light.

"This is a golem, albeit severely damaged. Maybe you saw the few guarding the portal."

"It's not a robot?" Lyle asked.

"No."

"Aw..." Kyle and Lyle's enthusiasm faded. Sulking, they wandered away.

Mr. Smith continued. "Interest in golem animation among goblin tribes is a recent development. The human threat is one factor, but goblins are scavengers by nature and they also possess a fascination with monstrosities. However, I don't think you're interested in goblin psychology or history; what is of interest to us is this round, engraved symbol." He pointed to the golem's forehead.

"This symbol represents the awareness and influence of the one who put it there. It's not the symbol which animates that which is less animate - it is the clear mind of the mage, funneled through and reflected around the external symbol placed on the golem."

Mr. Smith lowered his arm.

"A golem with a single symbol is crude and difficult to control. Placing a symbol on each limb is more flexible, but also energy intensive. Technomages place many symbols, thus they gain precision and a wide variety of options."

"One solution to increased complexity is automation, in which case the symbolism may distance from the mage's mind. In earth-heavy planes, when the symbolism becomes so dense as to become completely interweaved with the imprinted material, we call it 'technology'."

"Generally, you can treat a symbol like a miniature ego-image, a mediator of your presence. Whereas with elemental spells you mostly externalize emotions, with symbol-weaving you externalize your thoughts. The external form of a symbol serves as reinforcement, be it written, spoken, painted, pushed directly into another mind, or otherwise."

Mr. Smith lifted the golem's head and traced the outline of the symbol with his forefinger.

"A golem's symbol is its central point and also a weak point. Removing the symbol disturbs the clarity of the caster's understanding, and dispels the symbol's power. Of course, removal is not always easy, as the caster's mind extends it a degree of protection."

"It's not uncommon for symbol-weavers to forget about some symbols they maintain. Since they keep operating on a subconscious level, such neglected symbols become a drain on the psyche. It requires self-discipline to keep such clutter at bay. By destroying this damaged golem, we're actually doing the shaman a favor."

Mr. Smith placed his hand on the golem's forehead for a few seconds. The golem stopped twitching, and when Mr. Smith removed his hand, the metal below it was spotless and shiny - no sign of engraving.

"Now that the golem is destroyed, let's clean up the remains."

The plates of metal rose up into the air. A thin layer of smoke enveloped the plates as they began glowing white. With a bright flash, the floating metal turned into putty and imploded shortly thereafter. It left only a faint metallic smell behind.

"Some symbols are sleek and simple, capturing the essence of related understanding. Other symbols are complex, with parts maintaining sub-associations of their own. Then there are symbol-sets, where the meaning is attached not to a single symbol, but an arranged collection of them. Do any of you know what these are? We all use them."

"Words?" Rose asked.

"Runes?" Eric asked.

"An alphabet?" Lucy asked.

"Correct. The sounds and markings of an alphabet form words, which are the carriers of meaning, and exist within the framework of a language. Linguistic magic is very powerful, but also insidiously dangerous. It boosts thinking, and as a bonus, provides a relatively objective baseline for communication. Word-symbols of social languages reach deep into the collective unconscious and find their meanings there."

"The pull of language on the psyche is very strong; a language is a framework of symbols so extensive it very much tints the experienced reality. If you're not careful, it can become a mindmap telling you the world is flat."

Mr. Smith cracked his fingers.

"One misconception among fledgling mages is the 'true name' myth; believing that everything has a 'true name', and by knowing that name, the mage can claim complete control over the thing named. Unfortunately for them, labeling and categorizing does not equate with understanding."

"The true name of a thing is the thing itself. To experience the reality of that thing, the mage has to tear down the veil of linguistic abstraction and one's own symbolic constructs. It's not easy, especially for adults, who are often stuck in their own 'fishing net', as you say. That's why namelessness is considered sacred in some cultures."

"Elementalists, too, may confuse the elements as standalone things of 'true reality', and not as constructs of their own understanding. Truth is always in motion."

Too... much... info. My head hurts...

"But, enough theory, how about some practice?" Mr. Smith flicked his hand, and a shining symbol appeared in the air; the lines within it growing like branches of a tree. "Stand up, raise your arms, and concentrate on..."

* * *

"...you use too much power. Shall we take a break? I'll tell you a story," Mr. Smith said.

The exercises weren't difficult, but they were mentally tiring, and Eric welcomed a short recess. The three of them sat down on the grass.

"I got addicted to power when I was younger. I craved it, I needed it. I worked for a major company at the time, and I climbed the corporate ladder quite fast. A born leader, they said. People jumped at my command. Increasingly, all my emotions got tied to the feeling of power, and my thoughts revolved around its reflection, a social construct: money."

This is not just a story, but his *story!* Eric perked up.

"I quit my managerial job and made even more money sailing solo on the waters of international finance. Focusing on money as a measure of self-worth gave me focus, but such single-mindedness was taking its toll."

"I started having horrible nightmares at night and excruciating migraines at day. I ignored the nightmares, medicated heavily for the migraines, and drudged on. I had power in the world, but it was destroying me."

"Not long after, I was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Treatment didn't help; it threw my body in shambles and hastened my demise."

Eric bowed his head. *Terminal illness? That's...* This was one of those things that were so bad Eric didn't know what to think about, much less say.

"I met Master Joe during a particularly nasty nightmare episode. He made me stop and realize that death was imminent if I continued on this path. He offered me an out; it came with a heavy price, but considering the alternative it wasn't a difficult choice."

"With his help, I hacked away pieces of myself, keeping only the clearest parts of who I am. I died - but my body survived. Ironically, since only the clearest, strongest parts of me remained, I could handle even greater power than before."

Mr. Smith rolled up his left sleeve. He flexed his fingers a few times, and the skin on his arm turned transparent. A flow of red and black energies constituted the hand, reminding Eric of the violent energies of the bear-demon as it tried to break free.

"With most of my emotions gone, all I had was my mind, which I was forced to hone even more to contain the power flowing within. I turned my understanding into a benign prison for myself, and that allowed me to live the way you see me today."

Mr. Smith rolled up the other sleeve of his suit and let the skin on his hand turn transparent.

Eric saw a black swarm composing that hand. *Bugs?* He strained his eyes. *Symbols?!* He saw letters form words, numbers jump in and out of equations, and other symbols he knew not what they meant or how they were interacting. They flowed with a staggered motion in and out of Mr. Smith's body, forming the black hand shape that was visible.

"As you can see, symbol-weaving is very important to me, as it keeps me from losing control and bursting out in flames."

Mr. Smith rolled down his sleeves and clutched his hands. The violent energies meshed with the myriad symbols, and his skin rematerialized.

"The reason I shared my tale with you is because I see a similar hunger for power in the three of you. If you continue on paths of power, work on self-discipline, since only you can save you from yourself. Keep your ambition in check, and you won't fall into the same trap I did."

Chapter 17 - Telepathy

Mirroring is an advanced technique with a number of variations:

Mental mirroring simulates the flow of thought processes in order to root out miscommunications and establish a shared context.

Deep empath mirroring assumes and reflects back emotions in order to establish a deeper link. Use selectively, since this process also reinforces those feelings.

Soulhacking is an aggressive variant which can be used to great success against hostile or stubborn targets: fears are mirrored, mapped out, overcome and the subsequent back-and-forth is done from a place of power.

- Flows of Identity, Dreamer's Handbook

"Sure, we can sit on the grass. The goblin bugs are gone," Ohlson said.

Annie nodded.

"Here?" Eric asked.

"Yes." Annie raised her voice to address the rest of the class. "Everyone, sit! Class will begin shortly."

Eric caught a falling leaf and inspected it. It was yellowish-brown; some of its similarly tinted cousins already rested on the ground, and many were still on the branches of the tree, yet to fall. *Autumn has arrived. Whoever said there were no seasons here, lied.*

The pupils who came for the telepathy class slowly gathered and sat down, forming an arc around Annie. The majestic corona of the tree was large enough to provide all with a pleasant shade. Since Annie wasn't too quick to begin the class, the idle chatter grew louder.

She's still talking to Ohlson. I bet she didn't prepare... Again.

"I'm sorry about the delay," Annie said while shuffling her notes around. "I'm afraid I should have prepared more for this class. You know how it is; you think you covered everything, only to realize there's ten times more of what you should have included."

Annie waited, hoping for a sign of understanding from her audience, but there was none. Blank faces stared back, waiting for her to continue.

Annie sighed. "Anyway, this is Ohlson, and he will assist me with today's class." She nudged Ohlson. "Introduce yourself."

"Okay. Hi, I'm Ohlson." He bowed slightly.

"Telepathy is a complex subject and there are many different kinds of telepathy," Annie said.

Ohlson strolled next to Eric and sat down. "Nice to see you guys again."

"Hi," Rose said.

Lucy waved.

"There's a distance between people, and not just people, but between everything else as well. If that distance becomes too big, we get the feeling of separation and loneliness. If it gets too small, which might happen when using telepathy, we may lose our sense of selfhood."

Eric caught a blurry shimmer with the corner of his eye. His instinct told him that Kyle and Lyle tried to sneak up on someone, again. He stared at that spot for a few seconds... but saw nothing other than open space, and his instinct abated. *It's just leaves dancing in the wind.*

"There are two ways to deal with this distance: communion and communication. Communion reduces the distance directly, while communication builds a bridge that connects through the distance. With ordinary communication, you say what you want to say and just hope that the communion part too will take place. With telepathy, the emphasis is on communion first and communication second, but there are many ways to go about it."

"Empathy and understanding are two major aspects of telepathy: empathy is a meeting of feelings, while understanding is a meeting of thoughts. Use one to complement the other - everyone's base approach to telepathy is a little different."

There! Eric squinted, but he didn't see anything. *Dammit.*

"Do you see something there?" Eric asked Ohlson, whispering.

Ohlson stared for a while in the direction Eric was pointing. Slowly, his grumpy expression changed into a grin; he leaned close and whispered in Eric's ear. "It's the stealth spell of an old friend. You'll see her soon." Ohlson raised a finger to his nose as he leaned away, impressing on Eric that he should stay quiet.

"The particular form of telepathy we will train today is called 'mindspeak'. It can be used between entities who share a language or are at least humanoid enough to share

common perceptions, values and motivations. The idea behind mindspeak is to minimize intrusion, that is, to preserve the inner distances of the listener and preferably place simple words rather than full-blown ideas in their consciousness."

Annie glanced at her notes. "One benefit of this approach is that it does not override free will. Plus, it requires minimal effort, since only the quickest and most efficient mental pathways in the topmost conscious layer are used. The drawbacks of mindspeak are the same as with ordinary communication: understanding is not guaranteed and precise formulation may require greater mental clarity and effort."

Eric saw the shimmery blur a few more times as it neared Annie's location.

"For starters, let's just try and open ourselves, and see what kinds of telepathic connections develop. After that, we'll start practicing mindspeak, and if things go well, we might tackle mirroring, which is a powerful technique for establishing common ground and..."

The next few seconds happened fast. The shimmering revealed the outline of a young woman, and then the woman herself. She held a dagger in each hand; the blades cycled through the colors of the rainbow, and settled on the color green. Her black hair moved in tandem with her shadow.

Just about when one of the young woman's emerald blades was going to connect with the back of Annie's shoulder, Annie jumped ahead and parried the next blow with a knife that materialized in her hand.

Annie was at a disadvantage; she deflected some of the young assailant's blows and dodged the others. After several stumbling steps, Annie lost her balance and the green blades almost reached their target.

In the last moment, the air between them exploded, slamming Annie into the ground and throwing her attacker into the air. After resultless waving of arms and legs, the young woman fell hard to the ground.

Bones crackled, and that was Eric's cue to close his mouth and wipe its corners to make sure he wasn't drooling.

Annie slowly stood up, and yelled: "Get over here!" Before the black-haired attacker could stand firmly on her feet, she was involuntarily blinked across the distance, and fell into Annie's embrace.

"I missed you," the young woman said.

"I missed you too," Annie said. "How have you been?"

"Well, you know me." She smiled. "And you?"

"I almost caused a realm-breaking accident," Annie stepped back and laughed. "Other than that, not bad."

"You'll tell me all about- Hey, that's a familiar face! Look at him, all grown up!"

Ohlson stood up to greet his friend. With a few graceful steps, she moved near him and pecked his cheek.

"Umm, so strong," she said jokingly while squeezing his arms.

Ohlson blushed.

She wasn't older than Annie, and her outfit looked like it belonged to a heroine in an action movie. *Less revealing,* to Eric's chagrin. Two dagger-scabbards rested on her back, and sharp shurikens adorned her belt. Her hair was silky, and Eric felt like her eyes bestowed divine grace. He started sweating.

"What's with all these kids? Are you having a picnic or something?"

"A telepathy class, we're about the start the exercises," Annie said. "Wanna join?"

"Oh, cool!" She turned around to address the students. "Hey guys, sorry for interrupting. I hope I didn't scare you. I'm Ashley, Annie's friend. Well, let's get on with it!"

* * *

Eric's mind was going through turbulence. Half-thoughts popped up in all directions, and before Eric could examine them, they vanished, only to be replaced by different ones.

Eric couldn't keep up, and his mind succumbed to confusion. As the pressure increased, his head throbbed with pain.

"Stop," Eric uttered less loudly than intended.

"Why?" Rose asked.

"Just stop!" Eric cried out.

"Okay, okay."

The pressure eased up, but it took Eric a while to clear the confusion. *I have to learn how to sever telepathic links as soon as possible.*

"You really should have kept it simple, Rose. I had to distance myself from my thoughts to avoid the pain," Lucy said.

"At least you know how to do that." Eric frowned. "When you were the sender, at least you sent only a single word. And the faces, but that doesn't count."

"What faces?" Lucy asked. "I sent only my name."

"Well, I saw your name in huge letters, like ten times bigger than me, and I saw your face a hundred times, each face staring at one of the letters, some of them occasionally looking at me."

"That's strange. I saw nothing else, only the letter 'L'," Rose said.

"I assure you, I tried to send only the four letters," Lucy said. "You seeing my face - or faces - was entirely unintentional."

"It didn't bother me," Eric said. "All I'm saying is you did a much better job than Rose."

"Hmpf." Rose crossed her arms in front of her. "Let's see you do better, smartass."

"I didn't say I could do better, only that Lucy did."

"Shut up. It's your turn, so we'll see soon enough! You can't weasel out of this."

Eric took a deep breath. "All right. I'll try."

The other students were paired up or in small groups, and they kept it mostly quiet. The occasional sigh or yell was noticeable, but not intrusive.

He closed his eyes and tried to relax. *Hmm... what should I think of?*

Eric let go of his thoughts, until only an empty space existed in his mind's eye. Breathing was easy here. He allowed the feeling of being close to his friends enter the space of his imagination, and that feeling enabled a visualization of Rose and Lucy's form.

We're here. Eric wasn't sure if one of them said that, or if it was just his own mind conveying a feeling of readiness. He projected his own human form, too.

The Eric within Eric's mind went through the motions of casting a fireball. After the fireball flew away, he cast another and another, at a steady pace. He briefly considered aiming one at Rose, as a form of revenge for before, but decided against it. *Too bad, it would have been an interesting telepathic experiment.* Relaxed, he kept casting fireballs.

"Fire?" Lucy asked out loud.

Eric opened his eyes, and his mind's space vanished to whence it came from.

"I think he was casting a fireball... right?" Rose asked.

"Yes, I was making fireballs," Eric said.

"I guess I'm still woozy from before. It's your fault!" Lucy nudged Rose gently.

Rose frowned. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I didn't know it would be so awful for you."

"Take it easy, I'm just messing with you," Lucy acquiesced. "But I wouldn't mind some time off so I can get myself together."

"Yeah, let's just rest," Eric said.

Rose nodded.

The tree above was solemnly shedding its leaves.

Ashley was seated next to Annie, who was giving instructions to a pair of students. Eric would occasionally look at Ashley, feeling warm and fluffy inside, hoping that she would look at him, and hoping she won't look at him so he can keep looking at her.

Almost on the other side of the tree, Eric noticed a group being louder than the others. It was Kyle and Lyle, with Duke sniffing around.

"When did they get here?" Eric asked.

"Beats me," Rose said.

"It's almost strange we didn't notice them," Lucy chuckled.

The twins were with a young girl. *Gemma! Looks like she's bossing them around.* The boys were trying to impress her, but she just kept saying 'no' to everything. Eric turned away, glancing at Ashley again. He sighed.

"Listen!" Annie stood up. "I brought some items. I was hoping we won't need them, but since most of you aren't doing too well, we might as well put them to use."

The students stopped their exercises and turned towards Annie, who grabbed several items from her bag and lifted one.

"These are enchanted tuning forks." Annie flicked the fork with her finger - it vibrated, giving off a faint, but clear sound. "Specific frequencies of sound can be used as focus items." She flicked it again, harder this time.

The sound vibrated within Eric's head.

"Pass these on," Annie offered several tuning forks to the student next to her. "Ping them softly, and they'll help you open up and control telepathic channels in your mind."

"I thought we were doing well..." Eric said.

"I thought so too. The others must have been doing worse," Rose said.

"Tap them gently, and make sure everyone in your group uses it before passing it on," Annie instructed.

She kept handing out magic forks, and the class slowly became a cacophony. Eric found the whole experience interesting; listening to these quiet, seemingly random sounds turn into music. The forks he used sounded off a relaxing feeling, opening up new places in his mind to listen to.

The mental music ceased when Lyle managed to get his hands on two forks at the same time. He banged them together as hard as he could.

The result felt like a sharp stab to Eric - everyone started screaming. His ears were in pain, but the collective telepathic shrieking was worse, tearing at his sense of self. Without thinking, he covered his ears and screamed at the top of his lungs.

When the hostile reverberation stopped, Eric saw Lyle lying still on the ground and Kyle twitching his mouth like a rabid animal. Lucy and Rose were stunned; most others were in shock.

He grabbed Rose's hand, who in turn grabbed Lucy's. Except for some ringing in his ears, Eric's head cleared out.

"You guys okay?"

"Yeah."

Annie acted quickly: she cast some kind of spell that made herself double. *Illusion magic?* One Annie scooped up Lyle and Kyle, and teleported away. The other Annie ran around and inspected everyone else.

"Bilocation? Neat," Ashley complimented calmly.

"I know, right? Well, I practiced."

"I suppose there'll be no more exercises today. Where'd ya take the twins?"

"To Maeve, just in case." Annie snapped her fingers in front of an absent-minded student. "Mild shock. It'll pass."

"Remember when we used to do stuff like that?"

"You mean, how you used to drag me along to your 'adventures'?" Annie made the quotation-marks gesture.

"Come on, in wasn't hard to persuade you," Ashley said.

Annie sighed. "True."

* * *

"Quiet down! You'll all have a chance to ask questions." Annie waited for the clamoring to subside, and turned to Ashley. "We're all anxious to hear from you. Can you tell us about what's life like at the Outpost?"

"Well... for me, it's scary and challenging, but fun. You should ask Maeve or Smith, since they have more direct knowledge of what's going on. Smith's always tackling some collective nightmares; it's an uphill battle, but I help out when I can. Maeve is involved in politics and most of our enemies fear her. Allies too - when she's in a foul mood, run as fast as you can and pray to the most powerful deity you can imagine that you escape." Ashley chuckled. "Say, is it true she has taken up gardening? It's a bit difficult to envision her handling fertilizer."

"It's true," Annie said.

"In fact, we have nature magic class scheduled with her next," Lucy said.

Ashley nodded, laughing. "Imagine that! Maeve tending a garden..."

"How can they be both here and at the Outpost? Do they travel a lot?" Eric asked.

Annie winked. "Multi-location. Doing it across realms is no small feat."

"All right, what do you want to know?" Ashley asked the kids around her.

"Are there pirates? Harrr!" A boy asked.

"No, not that kind of pirates, mostly just mercenaries."

"How about vampires?" A girl asked.

"Yes, there are vampires."

The girl and her friends began to giggle, with hopeful expressions on their faces.

Ashley frowned. "Not the sparkly, sexy kind of vampires." She sighed. "I wish. These vampires are just old men who are powerful and too scared to die. They are undead: dying without getting dead." She coughed politely and tugged at one of her phase blades. "Not without some help."

"Too bad," Rose whispered. Lucy shrugged.

"Zombies?" Another boy asked.

"Way too many for it to be fun. Their dreams are dead."

The boy smiled contently. "And ninjas?"

"Well, I'm kind of a half-ninja; I'm nimble and I can use stealth magic. Though, my combat skills could always be better."

"Werewolves?"

"All right, that's enough. You're just messing with me, aren't you?"

The boy shook his head, but didn't say a word.

"How scary is it?" Another pupil asked.

"Well, it can be very scary. Almost everyone carries their personal nightmares with them. I'm not sure if I'm allowed to tell you more, because it might frighten you." She looked to Annie, questioning.

"One story only, and no profanities," Annie said.

"Okay. This is a true story with a sort of happy ending." Ashley cracked her knuckles. "So there I was, away from the Pulse at nighttime, in the middle of a zombie onslaught. I thought I could push through, but I overestimated my power and found myself alone. After mindlessly hacking apart zombies for what felt like days, I was pushed to the ground, exhausted. That putrid odor was so overwhelming. I really thought I was done for. And then..."

Ashley paused. All eyes were on her, and few were even holding back their breaths. "In a flash of light, nearby zombies got blasted off. An elven warrior charged in on a horse, swinging his sword. He had a robust, shiny armor which emanated light."

"The elves were supposedly wiped out when their realms collapsed in the Elven Cataclysm," Lucy explained, whispering.

"He most likely wore plain clothes befitting a nature-loving elf," Annie muttered.

"Shh, *I'm* telling the story here!"

"Sorry."

"So there was this elven warrior in shiny armor, which made the sun shine in the sky, rescuing me. He reached down from his beautiful horse, offered his hand, and pulled me up. He had the most gorgeous eyes. He asked me with a deep, singing voice: 'Are you all right?'"

"Wow..."

"Yeah. Speechless, I nodded. By the time I dusted off my clothes, he was gone, galloping into the sunset," Ashley gestured into the distance.

"I wasn't bothered by zombies after that, but when I got back, nobody believed me! I was told that the few elves who survived the obliteration of their realms were only shells of their former selves. But he wasn't! And nobody believed me."

"I believe you," Annie put her arm around Ashley. "Mostly."

"Thanks."

"Will you tell another story?" A student asked.

Ashley shook her head. "I'll go back to the Outpost soon, and I have stuff to take care of before I do."

"Oh, not yet you don't," Annie said. "Come, tell me more about this elven prince of yours in private. Class dismissed!"

Elfs, zwölfs... Eric frowned. Despite never having seen an elf, he was now sure he didn't like them. Especially the ones in shiny armor.

Chapter 18 - Nature Magic

One benefit of nature magic should be obvious even to an outsider: leverage. Be elegant as a butterfly flapping its wings, and you'll whip up a storm in no time.

- Balance of Natural Systems and Complexes,
Dreamer's Handbook

Snow painted the freezing landscape white. *I hate winter.* Eric's fire-shield cantrip kept him reasonably warm and resisted the tugs of the chilling wind.

The interlocked treehouses stood out of place this far from the Playground. There were six in total, their rooftops covered with sparkling snow.

One of the kids climbed the ladder, and others, like Eric, just hopped up to the entrance.

Eric looked around while waiting for the others to pass through the door. Dream Camp was always kind of bare: nothing but grass, leaves, and sunlight. Even so, it was filled with fulfilling feelings only the best of dreams could provide. Ambushed by the winter, the grass hidden under the snow and the bare trees told a solemn goodbye, of death, and of things that will never be.

Eric closed the door behind him.

Inside was warm and little globes of light floated above like little suns. *This place is enormous!* Eric was used to the slight distortions of distance that were common and natural to Dream Camp, but the discrepancy between the small treehouse on the outside and the huge warehouse on the inside was both impressive and disorienting.

Eric saw row upon row of earth-filled wooden boxes, many of which were home to lush and colorful plants. Large flower pots hanged from the ceiling containing the more unique ones.

"Wow," Rose murmured.

While most youngsters stood politely along the same row, others couldn't help but embrace the vastness and run around.

Eric spotted Maeve, who was already talking to a group of students.

"...It's not simply about needing power; power is everywhere. You want processable power you're accustomed to use, power that you can resist, power that remains under control of your identity. You don't just draw power from nature; expand and contract..."

Another group of students gathered around a young woman, who guided them along, pointed at various plants, and occasionally barked warnings to the kids running around.

"What is she saying?" Eric asked.

"Not to touch the plants," Rose said.

Eric frowned. "I know that. The other stuff."

"She's reciting botanical names in another language," Lucy said.

"Latin?" Rose asked.

Lucy nodded. "Romanes eunt domus."

"You speak Latin?" Eric asked incredulously.

"That's all I know."

"Oh."

Much of the greenery was just different kinds of grass - dark and long, wide and sturdy. Some looked sharp. The flowers Eric saw were mostly the kind they weed out rather than sell in a flower shop. He didn't know enough about saplings to know what kinds of trees they would grow into. *Such variety...*

"Hi, I'm Linda, Maeve's assistant," the young blonde said. "Welcome to our garden! I can point you to our prettier botanical marvels, or would you prefer to look around on your own?"

Eric shrugged.

"This isn't really a garden, is it?" Lucy asked. "It's more like a jungle warehouse."

Linda winced. "You're right. Most of these plants were outside, but we had to move them due to the changing weather conditions. We gathered all these from surrounding realms, and we're trying to determine which will be good fits for the ecosystems about to be implemented."

"I see," Lucy said. "Experiments?"

"Kind of. My job is only to take care of the plants. Maeve does the actual testing, most of it in her head. 'Projecting miniature realms to observe energetical and biological compatibility', something like that."

Lucy contemplated silently.

They heard Maeve laugh. "Everyone, gather around! We have to start with the theory."

Eric moved closer along with the others, and leaned on the edge of one of the wooden boxes.

"Winter in a bare-bones system is better suited to elemental and not nature magic... I was hoping to hold this class in a more tranquil setting, however, our realm is undergoing transformative changes and this will have to do."

"I really hope you paid attention in school, because nature magic uses all the knowledge you acquired, especially natural sciences." She continued by muttering under her breath, "Except for all the thick-headed misconceptions stuck like thorns in your brain."

Maeve looked around to make sure she had everyone's attention.

"On the rudimentary level, nature magic requires comprehension of systems; when we talk about understanding something, we usually mean understanding the system in which it functions. How does a plant grow? How is a house built? How do we cast spells? Stuff like that."

"'System' means 'standing together'. The notion of 'system' is valid in the context of the existence of an external observer and the process of analysis. With analysis, we break things into pieces in order to understand them."

A boy raised his hand. "That sounds like computers... Where does the magic come from?"

Maeve smirked. "An observant pipsqueak, aren't you? Well, you're right."

"A mage does not insist on external observation nor analysis, but the lack of such assumptions is enough to drive a scientist crazy." She chuckled. "But, they are very useful, and it's easier if you understand the systemic approach first before skipping to higher-order abstractions."

"When discussing advanced nature magic theory, instead of 'system' we use the term 'stand-alone complex'. What stands alone cannot be broken apart, right? A system has discrete parts, and a stand-alone complex has aspects. We can think of such complexes as emanations of the Holistic Principle. If we trade in hard analysis for softer discernment,

systems can be explained as a stand-alone complexes reduced through analytic understanding."

"And of course, we get rid of the problem of emergence in systems. That whole idea is not better than saying god did it, which while not technically incorrect, lacks certain finesse. It's not that awareness emerges in a sufficiently complex system, but that a stand-alone complex with sufficient diversity becomes evident to an external observer. A mage prefers not to get reduced to externality."

"This way, awareness is inherent as much as time is inherent. Psychologists also like to call it 'individuality', but..." Maeve's head shook gently from one side to the other. "...that context is messy."

"All in all, the advanced approach is less hands-on than operating with systems, but if you can warp and wrap your head around these concepts, it all fits together more nicely."

Blank and disinterested looks surrounded Maeve. The boy from before stared at her with his mouth agape.

Maeve opened her arms and said loudly, "Everything has soul. That's where the magic comes from!"

'Ah's and 'oh's escaped the audience, along with a few shrugs of pondering why something so obvious and matter-of-fact needed to be pointed out.

* * *

"Stop that! You're giving cancer to my plant," Linda admonished.

Eric pulled back his hovering hands from around the plant. "Sorry?"

"Your life-force is overpowering it. Just be gentle."

"I'll try."

Linda walked on to the next student.

Eric resumed the exercise. He placed his hands on the pot and tried again. Helping a plant grow wasn't easy. *Maybe instead of just giving it energy everywhere, I'll give only where it's needed. But how do I know what it needs? Hmm...*

Eric remembered Maeve talking about breaking things apart to understand them. *Maybe that's what I have to do... But where to start? I hope she didn't mean it literally.*

Eric looked at the plant again. *Leaves, stalk, bud. These are its parts. The veins on the leaves are lighter than the rest, and the third leaf is smaller than the other two. The stalk is very thin and uniform everywhere. Except where the leaves grow out. The bud at the top is tiny, and it looks like there are even tinier leaves and stuff inside. And of course! It also has roots which I don't see.*

Eric categorized the plant's parts, but wasn't sure how to proceed. A plant doesn't have a nervous system, blood coursing through its body, or a brain to think with. *It doesn't eat, it doesn't drink, it doesn't breathe air.*

Eric watched the glint of a tiniest droplet, which was sliding down from one of the leaves and into the soil.

But it does eat and drink! Not like me, but it does! Obvious really. And light! It does that green photo-thingy stuff with it. It also transports all this to all the cells.

Happy to have remembered some of the stuff he learned in biology class, he now knew what to do.

Eric prepared tiny packets of energy, which he projected into the soil and pushed up through the plant's roots. With a different kind of energy, he caressed the leaves of the plant, like the gentle touch of the wind.

Content that he figured it out, he let his conscious mind descend into a meditative state while engaged with the minutiae of this task. There was stillness, and there was movement. He might not have understood the microcosm of balances within the plant, but with an occasional glimpse, he felt it.

Time passed while Eric offered the plant everything he thought it needed - but not more. Eric felt happy because of his modest breakthrough.

"What are you doing? No, no, stop," Maeve said.

Eric broke his reverie and looked up to Maeve.

"When I instructed to help the plant grow, I didn't mean that you should *make* the plant grow. The exercise is about becoming aware of a connection. Be here for the plant; offer, and let the plant take what it needs instead of you shoving energy up its roots. It's almost the same as the crystal-charging exercise, see? Just watch it grow - these plants are vain, they like to be watched. Do by not doing. Got it?"

Eric took a deep breath, nodded, and turned his attention back to the plant. He grabbed the pot again and drove his thumbs into the soil.

* * *

"Are you meditating?" Lucy asked.

Master Joe opened his eyes. He was sitting on the snowy ground, legs crossed. The cold didn't bother him, even though he was wearing only a thin, white robe. *A bathrobe?*

"I'm preparing for a ritual - a nice trick I learned from druids long time ago."

"What kind of trick?"

"Well, being one with nature isn't quite the tranquil experience people make it out to be. If you push such oneness to the extreme, there is no 'you', only nature. Essentially, you push yourself out of existence! That's what those monks with vows of non-violence aspire to, but they fail to understand that the very act of existing is an act of violence. In my opinion, a better goal is to be one with nature as it accepts you as part of itself. Such a druidic approach is more about accepting higher responsibility and less about chasing a feeling of ecstasy."

"In this state, you project the structure of existence of the world around you - and inside equals outside, to the degree you're able to preserve your individuality. Energy is the back-and-forth movement, leylines are lines of existence your being projected on the world, and the angles of your existential intersection with the realm are also sometimes called 'angels'. But, you know, it's just terminology."

"You're confusing them, Joe," Maeve said.

"Right. Have you brought the seeds? I'm almost done preparing."

Maeve nodded. "Give it to him," she said to Rose.

Rose offered Master Joe a small sack of seeds.

"My projections show this should do," Maeve said.

Master Joe nodded, and took his time examining the contents of the sack.

"Come," Maeve beckoned the students. "We'll watch the ritual from a distance."

After they walked away, Master Joe got to his feet slowly, feigning the pains of old age.

"Here?" Eric asked.

"A little farther, over by that tree."

Eric, Rose and Lucy waited idly. Groups of kids trickled in for the event, and Maeve signaled them not to get any closer.

"I still don't understand what it is he will do," Eric said.

"Well... let's try it this way. Between who you were and who you will be, a healer can assist choosing the reality of that person. This is called a 'blessing'. Kids nowadays call it a 'buff' - don't ask me why. Curses work similarly, on the other end of the spectrum. What Joe's going to do is a major ritual for blessing the land."

"Or, it's like the elemental attunements, but instead of attuning to a particular element in a shallow dive, he's attuning to the whole realm in a depth where he can dream it all anew."

"Look, it's starting," Rose said.

When Master Joe finished his silly 'oh-my-old-bones' routine, he stretched out and raised his hands to the sky. He was chanting or singing something, but Eric couldn't quite make out the words or the melody.

What little fog there was dissipated, and the sun shined its light more brightly than before. More and more of the sky came apart to let the rays through.

The light danced around Master Joe's fingers, lit up his hands, and slowly enveloped his whole body. The chanting stopped, and Master Joe stood motionless, basking in the sunlight. *A sight to behold...*

Commencing the next stage of the ritual, Master Joe lowered himself down to one knee and placed both hands on the ground. The light was no longer a glimmer, but an intense beam between heaven and earth, with Master Joe as a conduit in the center.

Eric could hear the chanting now, but its melody was unlike anything he ever heard before. His brain struggled to comprehend it, but gave up soon, as Eric's mind too filled with the light of this melody.

A tear ran down Eric's cheek, but he couldn't look away.

The base of the beam-pillar widened, and the light propagated through the ground. When it reached the patch of earth under Eric's feet, he felt a slight tremor. The chanting stopped, but the influx of light didn't - the light weaved and cut through the ground in all directions, which, due to the multidimensional nature of Dream Camp, were many.

Master Joe unrobed, - *Is he wearing something beneath?* - but Eric could barely make out shapes because of all the blinding brightness.

Eric could no longer see the sun in the sky. Whether it has descended to earth or was simply outshined by Master Joe, Eric couldn't tell.

Master Joe spread his arms sideways, and that was the last Eric saw of Master Joe's human form.

The song in his head started again, and a shockwave of feelings hit Eric. He recalled his first time waking up in Dream Camp and the impressions all that exquisite detail and vividness left on him. This experience became magnified thousandfold. *One more way to die.*

Everything was changing, including Eric, and his mind was torn between giving into this feeling washing over the whole realm, and remaining Eric within the bounds of sanity.

The intensity of change allowed no time for a conscious choice. Most of what made Eric Eric went out with the shockwave of motion and change, and he felt himself light up like a miniature sun, his rays touching others who were going through the same transformation.

When the waves of light came back from the skies and the ground, the part of him that resisted the change clung to a feeling of déjà vu and the memory related to it.

The first time Eric met Master Joe, he saw him hammering on an old TV set stuck between channels. Now, Eric realized that scene was no more than a veil protecting him from the powerful unknown. Indeed, the whole realm with Eric in it felt like between channels - the waves and motion and light opening up fractal pathways of power, enabling Eric to be himself in ways he never thought of or experienced before.

Having now established a measure of understanding amongst the uncontrolled overstanding, Eric willed the ego-image of his human form into existence. His Sight condensed into sight, and his skin marked the boundary between close and distant touches. *It makes much more sense now.* Eric wiggled his hands, just to assure him of being there.

With his awakenings ended for a cycle, Eric inspected his surroundings. A radiant sun back high in the sky, and underneath, Master Joe's white robes on the ground marked the place where he probably wasn't.

Eric looked at Rose and Lucy. They had the same distant stare he presumably had, and he decided to let them take as much time as they needed. He noticed others too, standing motionless.

Eric turned away, seeking out the differences between this realm and its previous iteration. The snow was gone. It hasn't simply melted away, but disappeared without trace, taking with it the bareness of trees and the winter cold. The benign clouds and

rhythmical weather patterns hid and bridged a sky less elemental than the last. The ground below was quiet, but not silent; worms and other simple organisms worked to keep it fertile.

Life breeds life.

The number of layers of life multiplied, masking the more distant and less obvious loose ends of the realm. Eric heard the chirp of birds, and sensed other small animals bustling about. It wasn't just grass and trees anymore; many of the plants from the garden warehouse spread across the land, blooming.

Eric welcomed the realm, and was welcomed back.

* * *

When Eric woke up in his bed, tears flowed down his cheeks. He felt joy, because he never saw such beauty before. Sadness, too, was overwhelming, because he felt he will never again experience such beauty in his life.

Chapter 19 - Teleportation

Too few observers, and your reality isn't objective enough. Too many observers, and the identities merge together, collapsing the wavefunction beyond repair. Get it just right, and your reality might maintain some coherence.

[Teleporter's addendum: There's no need to operate at such high level to extract usefulness from this concept. Sidestep, and stretch yourself briefly - teleportation is your easy-going, everyday friend. Note, 'subspace' and 'hyperspace' are ugly words.]

- Stability, Dreamer's Handbook

Eric rammed into the door.

Thankfully, his thick forehead absorbed most of the impact, and before his nose would flatten painfully against the grainy surface of the door, leaving a mark of snot and blood, the rolling-lock mechanism gave way to the pressure and Eric tumbled through the open doorframe.

"Next!" Annie yelled.

Eric stood up, dusted off, and closed the door behind him. While he walked back to the end of the line, other students repeated the process.

"Teleportation is about pushing and pulling distance, fixed points and frames of reference. Some of you might remember, I talked about self-distances in telepathy class. The theory is the same, we just use it differently."

Typical Annie; making us do things before explaining what it actually is we're supposed to do. Eric chuckled. *She probably forgot.*

"The blink is the easiest of teleportations and requires only minor displacement within. It has a short range, and what you lack in understanding or finesse, you can make up for in willpower. It often occurs naturally, as a subconscious response to a higher stress situation. This training takes advantage of that fact. It's like riding a bicycle; once you learn it will come naturally."

The doorframe stood erect in the middle of a field of green grass, placed there by Annie solely for the purposes of this exercise - there was no wall or anything. Bashing through the door wasn't particularly painful, but it was uncomfortable and awkward. *At least her classes are not boring, I'll give her that.*

Winter went away as fast as it came, and spring blossomed again. Eric suspected it would be less perpetual than before. He had gotten used to the new realm teeming with life - it felt as natural as shifting one dream into another - but every now and then Eric would spot a minor detail, which would send him contemplating and admiring the beauty and complexity of it all; be it a bug, the dance of a rustling leaf, or a smile that expressed a new feeling.

When it was his turn again, Eric sprinted into the door - same result.

"The world around you is the framework of your existence. You awareness is pointlike within it, at the location you currently are. Your awareness will be pointlike at your desired location as well. All you have to do is raise your awareness, affix the framework, and condense your awareness just a tiny bit farther away."

"Like this." Annie extended her hand, and for a moment, she appeared to be holding hands with herself as she blinked just two steps away. "The degree to which you are able to temporarily enlarge your awareness, yet still hold yourself together, determines the blinkable distance."

I can do it. I just have to concentrate. Eric knew mentally that his human shape was present in a dream only because his habit willed it there. Surely, willing it to be on the other side of the door shouldn't be too difficult. Yet, it was clear to Eric that knowing something in one's head and actually making use of that knowledge are two different things.

After repeatedly bashing his head into the door, Eric noticed that, just for a fraction of a second, his mind behaved differently from the moment before impact until the moment just after. Derailed, shocked, or just a in a state of greater receptiveness - but certainly different. After a few more repetitions, it felt like that one moment was composed of three: some of his thoughts went ahead, anticipating the consequences of impact, some braced for it, ready to process the signals, and some lagged behind, clinging to a previous location and state of mind, about to imprint the future with the past.

Progress was slow, but Eric's introspective disentangling of thoughts got more refined. In his mind, he leaned on the farthermost thought and its feel of space - like when shifting balance from one leg to the other - and let the lagging thoughts snap towards it, skipping the in-between.

Eric tumbled on the grass. He got to his feet, dusted off, and turned to close the door behind him. Much to his amazement, the door remained closed. "What- how..."

"You did it; well done. Move on to the second exercise," Annie said. "Next!"

Eric slowly walked in the direction Annie signaled. Trying to convince himself that he indeed succeeded blinking through the door was time-consuming. He wasn't sure how he did it, but he had to accept that he did.

The site of the next exercise was nothing more than a huge, long slab of rock. Its sides were almost rectangular, and only one side was polished flat. From afar it looked like the rock was placed at the end of a short, red-graveled running track, but upon closer inspection, the gravel was in fact red-bladed, trimmed grass.

Rose was already there, along with a couple of students. One after the other, they sprinted into the flat face of the rock.

"Hey," Eric said.

"Hey," Rose replied.

While the previous exercise was inconvenient, this one seemed outright painful. Eric didn't let that faze him. *Falling and splattering on the ground, or sprinting and splattering on a rock wall - makes no difference.*

He heard Annie's voice from close by.

"With the standard 'port, the situation is reversed. The distance here is large, often far outside of view, but still within the same realm. The only requirement is that you have a very clear view of that location in your mind's eye."

"Since the world is quite different between the two locations, this time the fixed point has to be your own awareness while the framework changes around it. So, you let the world move while you stand still. This is a partial folding of space-time, in which all your relevant relations are transferred to the goal location."

"Large blinks or teleports within viewing distance we call jumps. Which method you'll use in this exercise is up to you."

Eric forced himself to relax. He stretched a few muscles, took a deep breath, and ran head-first into the wall.

It was pretty much what he expected: painful. But, he didn't lose consciousness, and the damage wasn't so severe that he would have to rematerialize. Eric collected himself. His nose felt strange and crooked. He grabbed, twisted it, and after a hurtful crackling of bones, the nose was back as it's supposed to be. What blood dripped off, he willed away.

Not too keen to mindlessly repeat this experience, he sought to apply his earlier insights while waiting his turn to come around.

The next few times he subconsciously sabotaged his own efforts - he either ran too slow, trying to avoid the pain, or too fast, trying to prove himself needlessly and missing the moment.

When he did manage to collect his focus and disentangle himself as before, the wall felt less firm and more rubbery, bouncing him back rather than halting him outright.

He kept trying to make that moment longer and cover a greater distance, but the slab was just too long.

Others were not faring better either, but that was no comfort to Eric. *Teleportation is such a versatile skill - I have to learn it!*

The next time around, he made a mental misstep: his lagging self entered the rock too, but his anticipating self wasn't anywhere near the end and he couldn't snap back to safety. Panic engulfed his mind as he realized he became stuck in the rock. His fear had weight and it was crushing him. Instinctively, he tried to inhale but couldn't, and he exhaled instead.

Last breath, he thought, before panic overcame him and reduced what remained to pure instinct.

...there was an action of breathing in, and Eric regained some control. His mind told him it was impossible to breathe rock, but he was doing exactly that, in whatever half-state he existed. It felt like breathing water, except much more arduous; imparting pain through his fear and into his awareness.

He clawed through the rock with his breathing, and emerged on one side of the rock.

Eric had his human form, and couldn't believe existence could be so light again. He panted for long minutes, sitting on the ground and leaning on the rock. It took time to think and feel coherently again.

Eventually, he stood up and walked to the end of the line, which was by now a few students longer. Knowing what to expect, his fear subsided. While he was waiting, he devised motions and strategies to breathe rock as well as distance.

Breathing rock for the second time wasn't easier, but he persevered. Each of the Eric-fragments transmigrated through the big slab, pushed by Eric's powerful breath.

Having rematerialized at the end, Eric fell to one knee. After a few seconds, he stood up and went to back to the line.

The third time Eric didn't sprint. He walked to the face of the wall and gently ran his hand over the surface. *Yuck.* A thin layer of blood and snot got stuck, and he wiped it off on his pants.

Eric inhaled. He envisioned parts of him swimming through the rock and reaching the end. He exhaled in a loud, inarticulate yell and pulled distance to zero. It was a simple

realization - he was already everywhere; it was only his awareness of it that determined his location. *I can go to nothingness and back, no problem.*

Eric took several more large breaths to wind down after the jump. The twisting no longer felt strange and he felt in-sync with himself. The slab of rock rested solidly behind him.

Eric straightened himself and looked around. *Where's the next exercise?*

* * *

"Gather around everyone. I want to show you something," Annie said.

"Another exercise?" A girl asked.

"More like a short excursion; I'll show you a technique I learned not too long ago. We're going to do it together, okay? Hold hands with each other and form a circle. Once we start, don't let go!"

Eric grabbed hands with Rose and Lucy, and by the time the circle got completed, they all looked like they were about to break into a traditional folk dance. Annie's eyes wandered as she made sure everyone was following her instructions, and her expression turned serious when she began concentrating.

Nothing happened at first, but a sensation slowly enveloped Eric. It was subtle, similar to the feeling of gazing aimlessly into the distance. *Or when I concentrate too hard and things begin to flow and mesh together* - a feeling of moving without moving. Yet, this time a sense of direction emanated from Annie, or rather, the possibility of many directions rolled into a single one.

It occurred to Eric that Annie deliberately searched for this feeling, and it wasn't just a side-effect of whatever she was doing, because when she found it and successfully impressed it upon the members of the circle, things began to move faster.

Eric got lifted into the air. He glanced at his classmates, but a shimmering impaired his vision. His mind slowly acclimatized, and Eric realized that he could somehow sense the directions his classmates were looking in.

Eric squeezed his partners' hands, and got light squeezes in response.

Once again, as this feeling or sense grew and matured, he felt it all being herded together by Annie and directed into a single line of travel.

"Don't talk, just listen. The points you affix can change dynamically within the jump-timeframe, sort of bouncing back and forth. A temporally extended jump is called realm-walking. Its conscious use is extremely hard to master, but subconsciously it is the commonest way of navigating through a not-too-lucid dreamscene. That's why dreams are considered to be 'dreamy' and 'shifting'. Blinking and 'porting are minor extremes of this process, and so are time and space in general."

He got thrust forward in a way he hadn't imagined possible before. Like breaking the wall between two different dreams, but this was continuous movement both in- and outside.

"Such movement can feel like breathing, and we often regard breathing as a sense on its own - a sense of existence, if you will. There are more arcane forms of teleportation as well, but those are high level multidimensional operations rather than straight up teleports spells, and they can be very hard for humans to instinctualize."

Eric soared. Landscapes of deserts, mountains, islands, forests, and many others flashed before his eyes. His mind found points of reference to hang onto, only to be forced into releasing them a moment later. But, with time, the speed of his perception increased and he could hold on longer.

Eric found the mountain landscape most impressive: silent and majestic. The swampy region evoked an urge to slap down mosquitoes, but thankfully, there were none. The islands and their long beaches promised rejuvenation. The burning sun of the desert warned of challenge and danger. The jungle... *Something's wrong.*

The landscapes were beautiful the way paintings were beautiful. *Something's missing.* Other than his fellow realm-walkers, he didn't see any humans. Except in the desert, plant life was lush and the animals... *There are no animals!*

Eric spotted a few small birds and when he concentrated - which wasn't easy, considering all the mind-boggling movement - he could sense several species of bugs, but those were the same as in the green fields and light forests of Dream Camp. *Shouldn't a jungle be full of animal life?*

"Hold on," Annie said.

The ground turned bleak and transparent. Plants grew scarce, and the ground itself lost its earthy texture. Line formed squares on the translucent floor, literal place-holders, as if saying: 'geography goes here'.

Eric's entire hand-holding group came into focus as they descended. They landed near a patch of assorted greenery, and surprisingly, a human being.

Maeve? She was rummaging through a box and throwing small green items over her shoulder, which bounced off the translucent tiles a few times before coming to rest.

Eric chuckled. *They look like tiny frogs. What a silly thought.*

Upon coming closer, Eric was surprised to see that they were indeed small tree frogs - unmoving but otherwise unharmed.

"You're not supposed to be here," Maeve said without turning around.

"Hello! I got permission from Master Joe to visit the shelved realms, and I was just introducing my students to realm-walking. What'ya doing?"

Maeve sighed and slowly straightened herself. "Realizing I can't handle it alone. With everything going on at the Outpost, and managing all this plant life, I can't possibly handle the animal biosphere... This latest cycle was taxing. I'll have to bring in a specialist." Maeve sighed once more. "Yeah, that's what I'll do."

"What's with all these frogs?"

"Surplus. They breed like rabbits and I had to put them in stasis. Which reminds me, I had some rabbits too... hmm..." Maeve started rummaging through a big sack.

"Anything we can do to help?" Annie asked.

"Unless you have an expert in both zoology and realm-weaving in your group, I don't think so," Maeve said.

"All right. We'll leave you to it then." Annie turned around to leave and motioned her class to follow.

"Wait! There *is* something you can help me with..." With tired steps, Maeve walked behind a cluster of trees, and guided back a white horse with a long, straight horn on its forehead. *Beautiful.*

After a moment of awe and exaltation, the kids ran to Annie, clamoring for permission to pet the unicorn. Annie looked questioningly to Maeve, who nodded.

"Slowly!" Annie yelled after the kids crowding the animal, who endured the ordeal with dignity.

When Eric looked into the eyes of the unicorn, he could see a wise kind of innocence. To Eric, the animal's radiant aura felt like the color white, fresh bed sheets, and the seeds of a dandelion floating gently in the wind.

"Is it a real unicorn?" A boy asked, stunned.

"As real as they get," Maeve answered.

"Remember when I told you that some feelings are so strong they can become places? Well, they can become animals too," Annie said.

"Kyle and Lyle will get green with envy when we tell them," Lucy mused.

"That's what they get for not coming to classes," Eric said. "Besides, they would find another, throw a lasso around it and ride it like the little cowboys they are."

Rose and Lucy smirked.

"Would you please take it home? I found it not too far from here, must've wandered off," Maeve asked Annie.

"Of course, it would be our privilege," Annie said.

Maeve nodded. "One less thing to worry about. Travel from where we are now straight to the Playground. After you reach the Playground, keep going in the same direction until it gets too bright. The unicorn will find its way from there; just don't let any of your kids go farther beyond. Can you handle it?"

"Yes," Annie said.

"Good."

Annie gently patted the unicorn along with the others, and let her hand rest. "Come on everyone, let's take it home! Put one hand on top of mine... we'll take a shortcut."

Chapter 20 - Nightmare Mastery

When the fear is gone, don't rush to fill the temporary void with nervousness, anxiety, need, addiction or negative habits. Take the deepest breath you can... then breathe out. The world is yours to dream!

- Practical Guide to Nightmares,
Dreamer's Handbook

"I'm glad you decided to come. As you know, the final nightmare class is not a teaching class, but a trial." Mr. Smith dangled a vial of black liquid in front of them.

"While fear on its own is terrifying, it is the confusion our minds create to avoid fear which allows nightmares to disfigure and magnify that fear out of proportion - making it appear so much worse than it is. This concoction will force you to follow the fear to its source and face some of your deepest fears directly. Think of this 'nightmare essence' as a vaccine - you deal with the fear now, in a controlled environment, so the nightmares at the Outpost will become more easily illuminated for and by you."

Master Joe stood behind Mr. Smith with solemn dignity, giving weight to the words and making them official.

Color drained from Eric's face. *What if we fail?*

Other than the two teachers, Eric, Rose and Lucy were alone in the class and the treehouse it took place in. This wasn't one of Maeve's insanely-big-on-the-inside warehouses, but a small, cozy, log-cabin kind of treehouse. It even had a fireplace.

"You can still change your minds, but I have to ask each of you," Mr. Smith turned to Eric, "are you sure you wish to proceed?"

Eric cleared his throat, and answered "Yes."

Mr. Smith turned to Lucy. "Are you sure you wish to proceed?"

Lucy, too, was paler than usual. She nodded tentatively, and followed it up by saying "Yes."

Mr. Smith looked at Rose. "Are you sure you wish to proceed?"

"I guess so," Rose said.

"Not good enough. You have to be sure this is what you want."

Rose contemplated for a moment. "I'm sure. I wish to proceed."

"Very well. You will need that resolve," Mr. Smith said and swayed the vial again. "I'll give each of you a vial such as this one. You will have to assimilate the contents of that vial. The common options are drinking it or letting it absorb through your skin, but any other option will work as well. I will now demonstrate, after which it is your turn."

Mr. Smith uncapped the vial and stared at it from close up. The liquid sprouted tiny tentacles which wiggled around. The black tentacles slowly elongated, and when one of them made contact with Mr. Smith's eyeball, they all latched onto it.

The liquid filled Mr. Smith's eye, soaking up through his tear-ducts and tracing his nerves. His other eye turned black too as the liquid emptied from the vial.

After several seconds of staying motionless in that state, Mr. Smith's body began to convulse.

Rose, Lucy, and Eric glanced at each other questioningly. *Is that supposed to happen?*

Master Joe walked forward with slow, measured steps. He let his right arm fall with a snap, and a large hammer materialized in his hand.

"I have a confession to make; you guys are not the only ones who will pass a personal milestone today. I modified that potion, which Johnny probably realized by now, but I'll nudge him just in case. Don't worry, his obstacle is different than yours - you'll still get the standard version."

Master Joe raised his hammer, swung it, and severed Mr. Smith's head right off his convulsing body.

A part of Eric marveled at how clean the cut was as the head rolled on the planks of the wooden floor. After a few seconds, it dissipated into a bloody mist.

The convulsions became more chaotic and fast beyond perception - the headless body looked like it was about to explode. Instead, the bloody mist flew back into the body, and the seizures slowed. When they stopped, a smiling boy stood in front of them, only slightly taller than Eric. He wore blue jeans and a t-shirt.

"That was a bit too much old-fashioned zen; I almost couldn't handle it," the boy said to Master Joe.

"Well, it worked, didn't it? Johnny my boy, a slap won't do anything to people like you. How many times have I told you? When you meet yourself on the road, kill it! Even if it's your mental composition - especially if it's your mental composition."

"I saw the logic of it, but I didn't quite... grok... what you meant. This balance is so different. The zen bridging emotion and logic is..." The boy struggled for words, but couldn't find any.

Master Joe simply nodded.

"Do you need me here?" The boy asked.

"Nah. Go have fun," Master Joe said.

The boy ran to Master Joe, hugged him, waved to everyone, and ran out of the tree house with a happy grin on his face.

The three of them waved back, half-stunned and unsure of what happened.

The hammer in Master Joe's hand shrunk as he pocketed it. When he withdrew his hand from the pocket of his robe, it contained three small vials, all filled with a liquid of midnight black.

"Here you go. Drink up!"

* * *

The liquid assaulted Eric's throat and he lost consciousness.

When he came to, his mind was in a strange place. He was lying on something uncomfortably hard and cold. He opened his eyes, but couldn't see anything except the irritating flicker of a faint neon light. He tried to get up, but his arms, legs, chest and forehead were bound to whatever he was lying on. *Shit.* He struggled to break free - with no result.

Calm down and think!

After a few breaths, Eric relaxed enough to attempt teleporting. *I'll just blink out of this.* He extended his spatial awareness and tried to desync into various selves, but he instantly and involuntarily snapped back to his initial point of awareness. He tried a few more times, but the result was ruthlessly the same. Like an invisible wall, something made his thoughts bounce back and prevented his imagination from moving. *My hands are bound and my mind is in a coffin. Shit-shit-shit-shit...*

On the verge of freaking out, Eric let a familiar part of him take control: his rage suppressed the fear and kindled the flames inside him. Fire was his friend within; his primary element. Eric allowed the fire to well up and he let it out in the way he practiced

many times before. He gave it all he got. He fully expected, if just for the moment, to become a flaming elemental, burning away all that bound him and reigning hellfire on all those who put him in this situation. It felt like shouting his soul out in flames.

The moment passed. There was no fire; the cold light flickered as if nothing happened.

Eric, after giving it his all, panted. He wished he would black out and wake up elsewhere.

Faint, malicious laughter echoed in his head, but he couldn't tell where it came from or if it was there at all. Only the ebb and flow of his fear assured him of his own existence and the passing of time.

Start, his mind echoed the word.

Shadowy hands stuck needles and injections into his body. The needles were thin - like for acupuncture - and didn't penetrate the body deep, but they were inserted precisely to inflict the most excruciating pain.

Eric cried out, and his body jerked from the strength of his cry, but no sound left his throat.

The large syringes had thick hypodermic needles, suitable for a horse or a small elephant. Oddly, the injections caused only numbness as green-gray liquids pumped into Eric's body. The mental anguish, however - *what are they giving me?!?!* - was on par with the excruciating pain.

Eric's soundless screams continued until they stopped. The needles got removed, but the respite didn't last.

The shadowy hands held small blades, which, with the hiss of metal sliding through flesh, cut into his body with quick successive moves. The rhythm and predictability of cuts would have been almost soothing if not for the pain and abominable nature of the act. *They are marking me.* The cuts were all over his body, but the majority centered on his face and torso. *Surgeons use medical marking pens; they are using shallow wounds.*

When it was over, his violated skin was covered with an intricate grid of blood. Eric heard the evil laugh in his head again.

Slowly, a single shadowy hand came into view and dangled a sheet of paper in front of Eric's eyes. *What?* With an apt move, the edge of the paper cut into the cornea of his left eye, and then his right.

Eric frantically ran from the screaming in his own head. The fact that the same shadowy hand promptly and successively plugged a normal-sized injection through the

center of both papercuts did not help. Whether the injections pushed something into his eyeballs or pulled something out, Eric wasn't in the state to tell.

Feeling resigned and empty, his vision red with haze, he barely noticed a small blade about to cut his eyelids away. *Snick-snack,* the blade worked like a scissor.

Panic resurged from whatever hidden pockets of strength Eric had left, just in time to notice the shadowy hand holding an ordinary spoon.

The hand did exactly what Eric feared it would do: the spoon breached one eyesocket, reached behind the eye, jerked until the muscles holding it snapped, and scooped out the eyeball.

This is the time to faint, Eric asserted, but he was prevented from fainting and the screams in his head reached an even higher pitch. The shadowy hand repeated the process with the other eye.

The screams went on for a long time, but their echoes eventually subsided and Eric had to accept the new normalcy of his situation. He couldn't see things ever going back to how they were before. Also, he couldn't see at all - since he had no eyes - but a tactile kind of sight enabled him to sense the immediate vicinity of his desecrated body. *At least the neon light is gone,* he remarked, but his attempt at humor left him even more hopeless and depressed.

The shadowy hands were back, brandishing large blades, saws, needles and other instruments.

A long blade made a large incision on his abdomen. The pain was dull. Several smaller cuts followed inside, but Eric barely noticed them. There was only the pressuring, choking, ominous feeling that they were doing something very sinister.

Dull pain marked another long incision, this time on his chest, and a large number of smaller cuts followed. *They're doing something. They're removing something. They're cutting out my organs!!!* Another incision, another dull pain.

As if the hands wanted him to see what was going on, Eric could sense his heart beating - no longer in his chest, but in the palm of a shadowy hand - fading into the dark.

How am I breathing? Eric felt like he was breathing, but he had no lungs - he knew this to be true.

Eric examined his condition to the best of his very limited abilities, and he felt empty inside. Literally.

They took all my inner organs. Why am I not dead?! I should be dead! Death was no longer something to be feared, but something to be welcomed. *I should be dead.* Both his

rationality and emotions dictated that death is preferable to his current state. *It is time. I want to die.*

Having made the decision, a wave of relief washed over him. He let go of his attachment to his body, floated above, and looked for the proverbial light at the end of a tunnel. With the release, he did see a light, and it was brilliant. *I'm going Home.*

Eric felt ecstatic and almost happy as he neared the light. *I'm coming.*

He began merging into the light...

Only to be yanked back and denied. Eric was jerked back into his severely mutilated, damp, and limiting body. *Let me die! I want to die! Why don't you let me die!* He yelled, but he knew it had no effect.

The shadowy hands did not let Eric die and they did not relent with the torture.

The top of his skull got sawed off and his brain syphoned out. With nothing major left except bone and skin, they began extracting individual muscles in the most painful way possible. *Let me die! Let me die!* With each piece removed, the prison of Eric's soul grew smaller and more crushing.

After every muscle piece got cut away and discarded, they began cutting away Eric's extremities; toes first, the fingers on his hands second, one knuckle at a time. Ears. Nose. Teeth, one by one. Lips.

The shadowy hands were running out of things to remove, but they took their sweet time. Eric's body approached being only a bloody, amorphous mass.

Arms and legs were severed in multiple stages, to make sure Eric was conscious enough to experience the pain. *Chop-chop.* Substantial force and heavy blades were required to cut away the bigger bones. His pelvis was crushed and then removed. The skin on what was once his abdomen and lower torso, torn away with reckless abandon. The vertebrae in the lower and mid spinal column got picked apart and severed, one by one. His ribs broken by sheer force, one at a time. His skull smashed and most pieces removed.

The passing of time no longer held any meaning to Eric. With most of himself gone, he wasn't sure he was 'Eric' anymore. He had just enough consciousness to experience pain and to feel the futility and sheer maliciousness of his imprisonment.

His prison was small: his lower jaw, a neckbone, and his right shoulder. That was it - all that remained of his dissected body. He thought they couldn't torture him more because taking away anything more would break their hold on him, but now and again they added something back only to take away something else, and ensure a perpetual state of pain and despair.

Eric saw broken dreams. He felt like he has woken up from this many times before, but not ever did he find the solution or exit from this most horrible of nightmares. Those Erics would wake up and go about their lives, but if they imagined the wrong thing or looked in the wrong direction, they would feel part of this nightmare and never be completely free.

He saw them waking up but not waking up, forgetting but not forgetting.

I'm the crux. The fool.

Whenever his thoughts strayed or attempted to escape, they were pushed back into the prison and the experience of pain. Eric's screams were silent even in his mind.

An infinity passed.

IT'S OKAY, came the words carrying a feeling. *IT'S OKAY NOT TO BE YOURSELF*. Eric's mind raced around it; something clicked. *It's okay not to be myself,* he internalized.

Eric's mind didn't have much time or will to analyze with words what it meant. *Does it mean it's okay to die? Does it mean I can be someone or something else? Or does it mean I don't have to exist at all? Or that* I can *exist? Or...*

The words quieted as Eric followed the light of his realization. He looked at and into his fear, followed it to the source, and saw there was no longer anything there. Only stillness - and he let go.

The laugh was his own. *Of course.*

His prison and pain no longer bound him. He reached the point where death met life, and Eric became an outpouring of Love. His ego no longer limited him, and he started claiming and rebuilding himself.

He drew lines of light upon his remaining mutilated husk. The light multiplied under his Touch.

Bones, nerves, organs, flesh, skin; all grew anew. Eric reached into the darkness of the shadowy hands and pulled it into his light. He understood they were parts of him he judged or rejected, and that torture was their way of getting Eric's attention.

Eric felt invincible, and he stated the fact to himself. *Sure, I can be killed, maimed, imprisoned or worse; but I can always BE, and laugh about it.*

Eric's outpouring of Love was answered with outpourings of Love from elsewhere, and he accepted gratefully. He never felt so Loved before. Some aspects of him were close, others more distant, but they all congratulated; he felt acceptance, approval, and shared joyousness.

Eric went over the light-form of his now complete body, and made minor tweaks here and there. It didn't near the complexity of a physical body, but as a resilient ego-image template to return to and regenerate from, he found it pretty awesome - beautiful even in its glory.

Eric echoed thanks throughout the realm, and vowed never to forget the Love.

He opened his eyes.

Chapter 21 - Epilogue

The mind projects its rationalizations on the irrationally broken symmetries of the world; a 'rational mind' is a contradiction of terms.

- Dynamic Perfection, Dreamer's Handbook

A circle of friends surrounded Eric.

The Playground was active as ever. Although he spent most of his time in the more remote outskirts of Dream Camp - attending classes, practicing, or just flying around while thinking things over - it was always refreshing to return. He wasn't too fond of crowds in real life - they drained him - but the crowd here always uplifted and energized him. The friendly, pliable nature of the place made it easy to come together and have fun - Eric could run and play to his heart's content with his mind off the leash.

"We'll miss you," Kyle said.

"We'll miss you too," Rose said, speaking for the three of them.

Duke nudged Eric's hand with his nose, sharing the sentiment, and got petted in return.

Lucy got to her knees and hugged Duke. Gemma promptly joined in.

"Why don't you stay so we can play together more?" Kyle asked.

"Somebody has to fight the nightmares... they are eating people alive, you know," Eric said.

"Cool..." Lyle remarked quietly.

"But you'll come visit, right?" Kyle asked.

"I have a better idea. Why don't you come and visit us?" Rose asked.

Lyle frowned. "Joe won't let anyone show us where the Outpost is, and we can't find it alone."

"Why not?"

Lyle's expression was pained. "He wants us to go to classes."

Rose raised an eyebrow. "So?"

Lyle looked down and twiddled his thumbs.

"I think the classes are fun," Aaron said. "Right?" He nudged Gemma.

She grabbed Aaron's hand, smiled sheepishly and nodded.

"I don't know..." Kyle said reluctantly.

"Come on, you can't be afraid of taking classes. How will we fight nightmares together if you're scared of studying?" Rose teased.

Kyle stomped his foot. "We're not scared!"

Rose leaned in. "Then promise me you'll go to classes and visit us later!"

"All right, we will! You'll see!" Kyle yelled.

"We're not scared!" Lyle added.

"That's the spirit!" Eric raised his hands to high-five both brothers. "Yeah! Master Joe was right when he said he had high hopes for you."

"He really said that?"

"He did."

Playmates and acquaintances trickled in, saying goodbye and wishing them a safe trip. Others came to see what the fuss was about, and gathered around.

"Are you really going to battle nightmares and stuff?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah, I think so. We'll see what Mr. Smith and the others will need us to do."

Aaron nodded, contemplating. He reached into his pocket, and took out a long, brown bag with something inside. "Here," he offered it to Eric. "I want you to have it. You'll need it more that I do."

"What is it?" Eric asked. He got no reply, and peeked into the bag. It was a giant-robot suit.

"I... I don't think I can accept this." Eric swallowed uncomfortably, and looked pleadingly to Rose.

"Tell you what," Rose moved closer to Aaron. "You have the dreams of your friends to defend now. Why don't you turn it into a proper battle frame?"

"I can already see it," Lucy gestured with her arms as she spoke. "Foldable metallic mesh with rune etchings of highest caliber. A large sword tempered in the elements. Varied techno-magical devices tinkered into powerful weapons."

Eric nodded, and offered the bag containing the robot suit back to Aaron. "It's a big responsibility; we're counting on you."

Aaron's face lit up. "Deal!" Teary-eyed and touched by his friends' actions, he accepted the bag.

Eric mouthed a silent 'thank you' to Lucy and Rose.

"Come on here, you," Rose said loudly. "Group hug!"

* * *

"Have you talked to Maeve?" Annie asked. "I think she wanted to give you something for your journey before you left."

"We have."

Eric, Rose and Lucy sought out each teacher, to say goodbye and ask for any advice they would care to impart.

Mr. Smith outlined which enemies they could encounter along the way and the fastest way to deal with them.

Maeve gave them equipment, and warned not to tangle with any of the factions before talking to her at the Outpost. She also bestowed a blessing to keep more significant threats at bay.

Master Joe said they're now persons with backbone, able to choose their own destinies. He assured them they'll be fine.

Annie outlined the geography of the Outpost and surrounding places, and suggested several paths of travel. The details were lost on Eric, but Lucy took it upon herself to handle all preparations.

Guided by Dancing Feather, Ohlson planned to visit one of the more abstract realms, but he promised to drop by and say 'hi' if was in the neighborhood. He made them promise to let him know if they ever needed help or backup.

In a talk of a more personal nature, Eric confided in Ohlson that he was unsure about leaving. *What if I won't want to come back if I decide to leave?* Ohlson patted Eric on the back and remarked that he has grown taller.

"Are you rested? Have you recovered fully from your trials?"

"We have."

Eric suffered no adverse reactions, but Rose had spiraly marks all over her body which took several days to fade, and Lucy's mood alternated between over-thinking and impulsiveness for a while. Thankfully, these after-effects subsided and they were as good as new. *Better than new, actually.*

Since their experiences during the trials had deep personal significance, they tried talking about it and sharing their insights, but the experiences were very difficult to convey. They tried telepathy too, but the deeper layers of meaning were indiscernible and non-sensical to each other.

Eric understood that Rose's trial was about manipulation and finding one's existence amongst opposing forces, and that Lucy's trial was about overreliance on knowledge and the feeling of being lost with no foothold, but beyond that, things stopped making sense. His descriptions and attempts to communicate the experience of his torturous rebirth also proved woefully inadequate in conveying the intensity of the experience.

Nevertheless, they each found some 'inner peace'-like quality, which affected them positively on a personal level, and as a team. Eric warned himself not to take Lucy and Rose's presence for granted.

"Do you have everything you need? Double-check," Annie instructed.

Eric lowered his backpack and inspected the contents: a change of clothes, some food, a water bottle, a wand, and a short sword. *Just the essentials.* He took out the sword and fastened the scabbard. One of the compartments contained a small pouch of crystals Maeve gave them. *Standardized currency crystals, she said.* There was also a multi-purpose folding knife, which he slid into his back pocket.

Eric closed the backpack and briefly marveled at a sticker attached to it; it said 'GOOD FRIEND'. *Now I'll have to start my own sticker collection,* he chuckled.

"We have everything."

Annie tapped the air in front of her. It swirled and drained of color.

Eric was hit by the odor of stale air and watched as Annie's spell revealed a landscape similar to the present one, except much less vibrant. *It can't be a portal... she removed the shield!*

"Are you sure you wish to take the scenic route?" Annie asked. "I could just 'port you directly to the Outpost."

"Where's the fun in that?" Rose remarked.

"Didn't you tell me traversing the route once would make it easier for us to teleport there by ourselves?" Lucy asked.

"True... but you might have changed your minds."

Eric laughed. "We haven't."

Annie smiled. "I had to ask. Just keep going in that direction," she signaled. "Try to stick to roads and beaten paths. If you don't stray too much, you'll see periodic flashes of light. That's the Pulse - the Outpost's active shielding and light source. Just keep heading towards it and you'll reach your destination."

Eric took a few steps and stopped at the in-between. One half of his horizon was filled with the familiar motions and sounds of Dream Camp. The other half was bleak by comparison, but the feeling of danger it promised filled Eric with excitement. *I'll miss the fresh air... I'll miss a lot of things...*

"Ready?" Lucy asked.

"Yes," Rose said.

"Yes!" Eric said.

"Well then, off you go! I'll meet up with you once you arrive," Annie said. "And don't fight every zombie along the way!"

Eric, Rose and Lucy waved goodbye and set off into the twilight.